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THE ULTIMATE PASSION

A NOVEL

BY

PHILIP VERRILL MIGHELS

AUTHOR OF

"BRUVVER JIM'S BABY"

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THE ULTIMATE PASSION

I

JOHN HAKON stood face to face with political death and knew that nothing could save him. Nevertheless he was fighting still. For five days past he had waged his war with the handful of faithful followers still at his back, and for more than five days the enemy, summed up in the one word Money, had besieged his position every hour, sans mercy, sans respite.

It was hardly even so much as a grim satisfaction to Hakon to know that he stood in the way of the moneyed power to such an extent as to block their wish to elect their tool as United States senator in his place. It could not be a consolation to a man so earnest as he to know that caucus after caucus had been unavailing, and that now a deadlock had been brought about, with himself as a mere iron wedge, so to speak, between two warring factions, that both represented dishonesty. Nothing, indeed, could ameliorate the fact that he, John Hakon, senator for his State for one brilliantly promising term, had been slain overnight almost, by a power against which he could not even struggle.

The sickening feature of it all was comprehended in the knowledge that he might still have been sena-

tor had he merely been willing to sell himself out to these same moneyed powers. They had made him their offers shamelessly; they had added their threats, and then, upon his refusal to barter off his honesty and principles, he had felt their power at last. In some ways the bitterest portion of the whole affair lay in the fact that friends had sold him out—friends who had worked beside him, for reforms and decency—friends who had sounded the loudest applause at every smarting blow he struck at Washington, when corruption's ugly head appeared or shamelessness dared to stalk through the halls of the nation's seat of government. He had been sold out while refusing to sell himself and these same supporters. He had been betrayed, delivered up for a mess of pottage — the promises of patronage, or the sight of filthy gold itself. He was hurt to the death, so far as political preference in his own State could ever be considered, and yet he must go on living. Now — deserted by the very generals, captains, and privates of his once redoubtable force, left to die here alone, stripped of his harness, stripped of everything save honor — he grimly wondered how much longer it would be before some final crash would hurl him headlong from the path of the forces who were determined to seat a scion of corruption where he once had been.

The final blow came abruptly, and it came from such a quarter that the man was stunned. Alone in his study that final night, he was startled to hear a tremendous rap on his door and to see a man boldly enter the room, without the slightest ceremony of having himself announced by the servant of the house. The man was one he knew as an active, dangerous agent of the powers behind the sovereign

power of the very people themselves. His name was Senn. He was a quiet, inscrutable person, with shifting eyes and a mirthless mouth as thin as a line.

"Senator Hakon," said the visitor in his quiet manner as he entered the room and strode to the table at which his host had been sitting, "I have come here to-night to induce you to withdraw from this present senatorial fight."

"Then you have wasted quite a little time already, and will only waste more by remaining," answered Hakon, his deep-set eyes ablaze with an almost fanatical gleam of honesty. "I shall remain in the fight till I have nothing left—not even a shred of friendship, or a foot of ground on which to stand. You have got me killed, but at least my political corpse is in your way, and while it remains you cannot elect your henchman!"

"Oh, you're not a corpse, my dear senator," replied Mr. Senn. "You will come to, fast enough, one of these days, but you failed to see things in a sensible light, and now you will quietly get out of the way. I didn't come here to ask you to get out, I came to say that you will get out, and here—"

"You are here without an invitation," Hakon interrupted. "Let me tell you at once that your presence is offensive and your mission useless."

"And here," resumed Senn, unheedingly, "here is the little, insignificant joker that will alter your mind," and he took from his pocket an envelope so flat as to appear almost empty. This he held in his hand, carelessly.

"Sit down," he said to Hakon, who had been standing since his entry. "We'll talk this over as gentlemen should," and he seated himself, drew out two cigars, offered one to Hakon, expressed regret at his

host's refusal to smoke, and lighted a weed for himself.

The mood in which the man appeared was a new one to Hakon, who had seen his visitor hardly more than half a dozen times in his life.

"Mr. Hakon—or Senator Hakon," resumed Mr. Senn, after puffing his cigar to a lively glow, "you are a wealthy man. How did you come by your money?"

"That would be none of your business, if the story were not already public property," answered Hakon. "What is it that you came here to say?"

"You're right," replied his visitor. "Everybody knows that your money was left by your father, who made his pile in structural iron, and building bridges—all more or less for public use."

"Well?" demanded Hakon.

"And he got his start, you remember, from profits derived from that Blue Gap bridge that collapsed and dropped several hundred persons down to eternity—all because of somebody's economical frame of mind, in providing inadequate girders."

Hakon became pale suddenly with anger. He could have taken the fellow before him by the throat and choked him to death, for the infamy which he felt Mr. Senn's innuendo committed.

"You—" he said, barely able to make an utterance. "You—!" But he could add no expletive; there was nothing that would answer his purpose. "By God! if that's an insinuation against the memory of my father, you'll eat it or leave this house on your hands and knees, unable to walk!" he said.

Senn had expected no such terrible wrath as he found his words had invoked. He had made no just estimate on the all that honor meant to the man before him now. He quailed, for a moment, almost afraid

to proceed with his business; then he thought at once of his lighted cigar, and, puffing at it quietly, assumed the mastery of the situation with something that passed very well for calm.

"I didn't come here to go hinting around the bush," he said. "I came here to give you a chance to withdraw from the senatorial fight in a quiet, unobtrusive manner. I've got a letter here in this envelope. It was written by your father. I am going to let you read it. If you make any attempt to destroy it you will only hurt yourself, as we have had it carefully photographed, to provide against all accidents."

The flush of color which had rushed to Hakon's face, in his anger, now retreated. Certain lines of worry, graven on his countenance during recent trials, perceptibly deepened. He watched his visitor take from the envelope a piece of ordinary paper on which a few lines of writing appeared. The fellow's assurance was ominous.

"This letter, as you will readily discern, is all in the well-known handwriting of your late, respected father," said Senn, unfolding the paper. "We do not wish to use it, as you will readily understand. It remains for you to decide, however, as to the course to be pursued. Do you mind just giving your word that you will not attempt its destruction?"

Hakon could not possibly have analyzed the vague feeling of dread in his heart.

"I could have no wish to destroy any letter ever written by my father," he answered, with an effort at confidence. "You need not fear any violent conduct towards it, I assure you."

"Read it," said Senn, and he handed it over at once.

Hakon took it in his hand. Despite his every effort, his fingers shook as he moved towards the lamp on his table. At a glance he saw that the note was indubitably in his father's peculiar, angular chirography, with the old, inimitable signature at the bottom of the sheet.

He noted these things first, as one almost afraid to proceed with the reading. Then he looked at the date, so characteristic of his father's style. It was old, that date; indeed, it went back precisely to that by-gone day when, as Senn had intimated, his father had possessed no money, and was barely making a start in the world, constructing the bridge that had proved such a frail spanning over death.

When he could delay no longer, Hakon read the brief communication. It was addressed to one of the engineers who had been most concerned in building that fatal structure.

"In my hurried departure from the works, yesterday," the letter read, "I may not have left you sufficiently impressed with latest instructions. This is merely in the nature of a memorandum. Please remember that you are hereby reminded that you must use the lighter girders, for the sake of economy. This is imperative. I was glad to note your progress at abutment 2."

That was all; but Hakon, reading it three times over and then once more, in a wild, desperate effort to see it in some other manner, beheld the lines swinging crazily before his vision, and felt as if a blow had fallen upon him with a weight appalling and awful. Those few words—"you must use the lighter girders, for the sake of economy"—could hardly have hurt him more had they been embossed upon his flesh.

He stood there stunned, unable to speak, unable to

think. His visitor came to his side, and slipping the letter from his listless fingers, folded it carefully, replaced it in its envelope and thrust it again in his pocket.

"I see you know the writing," he said, in his quietest manner. "Now, what shall I say to my friends? I've got to be going. Don't you think you might retire from the fight?" He waited for a moment and then added: "It ain't as if you stood a show of winning out yourself, you know. You're beaten to a finish. All you've got to do is to withdraw your name and leave the rest to us."

Hakon stared at him blankly. It took him fully half a minute to realize all that his visitor meant. Even then he could not fathom the entire depth of the situation, in his dazed and injured state of mind.

"And what if I do not withdraw?" he said, in a mere echo of his former defiance. "What then?"

"Nothing, only we'll have to make this letter public," answered Senn. "It's for you to decide. We'll hold it back if you withdraw."

Hakon's face burned redly. He hardly knew the way to support this intelligence concerning his father, or the thought of permitting the world to share in a knowledge of that letter. His father had so earnestly denied all knowledge that the weaker iron was used; he had so successfully convinced the world that the fault was not to be laid at his door. There had been no question of his honor—no hint at negligence or parsimony, or any slight deviation from the path of rectitude on his part, either after the disaster or at any other time; and he had died in the honor and esteem of all his fellow-townsmen.

The revelation made in the letter gave Hakon a sickness that extended throughout his entire system.

He could not bear the thought of what an exposure of the letter would mean to him and his family honor. He had been wounded before; he was smitten almost senseless to the earth, by this, and could not stagger again to his feet.

"I'll withdraw," he said, in a faint and faltering utterance. "If you'll give me the letter, I'll withdraw."

"I'm going to keep the letter," answered Senn, swift to see his advantage and add to the pressure. "You'll withdraw and leave the document in our possession, or we'll use it the way we think most likely to arouse a public interest in ancient history. What do you say?"

As one who salutes his conqueror, who stands above his stabbed and prostrate form, Hakon saluted Senn.

"Perhaps you brought along some note of withdrawal for me to sign," he said.

"I did," said his visitor, and he took it from his pocket.

Hakon read it with eyes that saw nothing. Its words ran through his senses, but left no impression. He merely ascertained that there was nothing in the paper that could ever appear shameful to himself. Then he sat down, signed and delivered it, and heard his visitor turn away to depart.

At the door Senn halted and looked back, beholding the stricken form of the man who sat beside the table, with his head leaning weakly on his hand.

"Remember, you're not a corpse by a good long sight, my dear senator," he said. "You'll come to, yet; you mark my word."

And Hakon was left there alone.

II

THE dinner was over, the wine had run its course, but Hakon's elation was lifting and sweeping upward steadily, as he sat here at last with Amos Graystone, alone in his New York home. This was the hour for which he had waited; this was the moment he had begged of the Fates. Import hung in the very air; the smoke of Graystone's cigars contained an attar of power. Graystone himself, in this semi-domestic repose, took on new attributes of might.

In the sudden realization of what it meant to have this man behind his schemes and aspirations, Hakon felt his emotion becoming a subtle excitement, despite his effort to be calm. He was watching the face of the older man as he might have watched the countenance of Destiny.

Graystone was a man below, rather than above, the medium height. He was clean-shaven, eagle-nosed, immobile. The sternness in him, crystallized about his mouth, had graven there a thin, hard line; on his brow it had knotted a frown; in his eyes it had kindled frozen fire. Strength and reserve of strength had marked him with the signs that all might read. The personal power that had made him in earlier years a political Hercules, dominant and irresistible, had created of his personality at last an entity gigantic in finance, and, therefore, well-

nigh omnipotent to-day in the governmental scheme of his city, his state, and his nation.

This evening he gazed, in his cold, steady way, at the blazing logs of the fire, and taking his cigar from his mouth fondled it quietly. It would serve him delights for at least another hour; he therefore loved it as he loved no man; and even then his love meant only that he would use it to its utter destruction. Without the slightest change of position he spoke.

"John Adams Hakon, President of the United States," he said, and he slowly nodded his head. Then he placed his cigar again between his lips.

The excitement in Hakon's being suddenly increased to fever heat. The man's face reddened; his eyes were glittering. Never, even to himself, had he dared to frame a collocation of words so bold. They came from Graystone now with almost dizzying significance. Hakon had hardly permitted himself to believe that the slow and gradual progress of events and negotiations had actually consummated at last, long and tedious as the process had been. He had known this man for the past six months; he had even suspected that the steady growth of his own presidential boom might be attributable to Graystone, Senn, and others of the combination; nevertheless he had almost ceased to look for any such uncoiling of this human main-spring of achievement as this speech abruptly signified.

Graystone's abruptness, indeed, threw Hakon's marshalled forces into bewilderment. He tried to smoke as Graystone smoked, but his weed was burning like a torch. The cold, worldly, half-cynical answer with which he wished to meet his host's observation failed to come.

He laughed nervously. "It—sounds easy," was all he could say.

"It's easy enough—don't you worry about that," replied his host, still staring at the fire. "You can leave that to me."

The answer seemed to Hakon a confirmation of his hopes. It sounded as if Graystone had made up his mind to give him the requisite support. He said nothing more.

Graystone smoked in silence for nearly three minutes. Then he made an announcement.

"Our next party candidate for president will, of course, be obliged to make a few little arrangements and agreements with his forces."

As a part of his own insidious scheme, John Hakon had come to the seats of the mighty prepared to make concessions, at least apparently. How much of his body or soul would seem to remain his personal property after all had been done, he could not and dared not conjecture. He merely said:

"Of course."

Graystone continued to address the fire.

"This man Brevoort is a threat," he said. "He's a danger. There is only one way to beat him, and that is in snatching the nomination. We have laid a few wires already, and we can do the trick. It's easy to manage a national convention, if you go about it properly; but what could you do with a country of nearly fifty States?"

The assurance, the boldness of this observation left Hakon more than ever amazed, well as he knew and acknowledged the power of the syndicated kings of politics and finance. Again he made no reply. He knew the usefulness of silence.

The next declaration on the part of his host was equally disconcerting.

"Hakon, as senator from your State, you gave us considerable trouble," confessed the older man, frankly. "We haven't forgotten anything you did."

Hakon reddened. He knew that at Washington, in that time, now five years removed, he had been a force, as a plague is a force. He had stripped truths naked; he had fought with honesty in one hand, fanatical zeal in the other, and a knife between his teeth. In those days he had represented the sort of patriotism in the paucity of which Rome toppled to her ruin. His host's present accusation was a compliment that he dearly prized. But "they"—the clique personified by this power behind the powers—had beaten him, slain him where he stood, as he remembered only too keenly. Not content with that, they had held that letter of his father's over his head almost hourly ever since. Now, in response to their summons, and his own daring resolve, he was come to their camp. His blush was half for shame, half for pride, in Graystone's acknowledgment of what he once had been.

He answered, equivocally: "An older man might not have made my—mistakes. That was some time ago."

"They were not mistakes," answered Graystone, coolly, and still without looking at his guest. "If you hadn't hurt—you wouldn't be here to-night." He checked himself at the verge of further admissions. That he and his company of commercial and political berserkers had admired and feared John Hakon and longed to enroll him among their number, for more than five years, was information better for the keeping

Hakon, thus to find that he had, in those days, made himself a foe more worthy of their steel than even he himself had been permitted to know, was beset with conflicting emotions. There was threat in the glitter of his eyes, even as he took to himself a little satisfaction at Graystone's somewhat belated compliment.

"I did my utmost at the time," he said.

Graystone seemed hardly to have heard. He was deeply engrossed in caressing that cigar and wooing from it smoky breaths of languor. Hakon's cigar had gone out. He puffed cold, reeking air through its ruins, oblivious of the taste in his mouth. President! Graystone had said it—was treating it all as settled! Graystone, who could force the wildest wish to realization! Graystone, with slavish political bosses of four great States crammed indiscriminately into one pocket, and magnates of Wall Street bulging out the other. A wish to get up and pace the confines of the room possessed Hakon tremendously. He remained in his seat, but he sweated, watching Graystone and waiting for the man to speak again.

Graystone spoke somewhat abruptly.

"How'd you like the dinner?" he demanded.

For the first time in half an hour he looked at Hakon straightly, with his piercing, icy stare.

Hakon was startled from his thoughts. In a flash-like calculation he thought the matter of politics a topic closed for the evening.

"Dinner? Why, first-rate," he said. "First-rate. I don't know when I've enjoyed a dinner more."

"Yes, you seemed to be in very good spirits," added Graystone, in his even tones again. He resumed his study of the fire. "You got on pretty well with Clara, huh?"

Hakon recalled Miss Graystone's personality not unpleasantly.

"Yes. I found your daughter entertaining," he agreed, with ready candor. "It was quite a pleasure to make her acquaintance." He paused, then deliberately added a touch of blarney. "Very clever girl — talks and acts rather remarkably like her father."

"Never mind that," grumbled his host. "We're talking plainly. I saw for myself that you found her fit to be seen."

Hakon said: "Decidedly." A vague return of some undefined suspicion, experienced at the dinner, now colored his wonder as to what was coming. Graystone relieved his suspense without delay.

He turned again and faced the younger man austerely.

"Hakon," he said, "my one ambition is to see my daughter the mistress of the White House at Washington."

For a second Hakon failed to comprehend the entire significance of the man's confession. Then, in a sudden glare of light, he knew the all that it meant—the dinner—everything. It was doubtless to be a part of the bargain and sale—marriage with Graystone's daughter—Miss Graystone, no longer young and never either beautiful or charming—Miss Clara Graystone, uncourted, unsought, a pride in the heart and a thorn in the side of her father—this was what it meant for Hakon to be forced towards the presidential goal by this man of political omnipotence.

That the girl had been slighted, ignored, even outcast by the one exclusive clique to whose circles alone Amos Graystone was willing to consign her—

that this was now rankling in the breast of the man before him, John Hakon could not know. He merely recognized the fact that of all the conditions precedent that he would be obliged to meet before his name could be more than scattered through the papers in connection with the presidential gossip, this marriage with Clara Graystone would be absolutely first upon the list. He saw it all with amazing clearness. It came to his mind like a shock, it was so thoroughly unexpected.

He could not frame either answer, consent, or refusal to such a proposition, in a moment. It added an element on which he could not possibly have counted. It halted him as a man is halted who—protecting, as he thinks, every vulnerable point—is suddenly dealt a staggering blow from an ambush for which he was wholly unprepared.

He saw Graystone's eyes bent searchingly upon him, their steady, flintlike coloring inescapable. He knew his host was almost reading every thought in his brain, interpreting every expression on his face. And he was coloring painfully, and striving to master his faculties to meet this unforeseen element in his schemes, and wondering how far he could martyr his person, feelings, and being in the greatness of his self-appointed cause.

"Your—daughter," he faltered. "She would—certainly grace—"

"See here, I don't expect a definite answer on this to-night," interrupted Graystone, incisively. "You've got a right to think it out, and a woman—a woman has to be handled."

"I—" started Hakon.

"I know. You didn't expect it," interposed his host, as before. "That's why I'm giving you time

to think it over. It's only a hint. I wouldn't have gone so far if I hadn't taken a fancy to you personally. You needn't say another word about it—to-night. You'll want to drop in on me anyhow, in a couple of days."

He thought he knew his man. He was sure he knew what a couple of days would do, after all he had purposely said and done to promote Hakon's presidential aspirations and to prepare the way for his nomination, through the press.

"Yes—I realize that—a woman, anyway," stammered Hakon, who could not possibly collect his thoughts—"that a lady has a right to be warned—at least." He smiled, but the effort was mirthless.

"Sure," said his host. He did not add that his daughter had been "warned" already, a fact which, in a measure, explained no little of the animation she had shown at the dinner. "Sure. Will you have a fresh cigar?"

"No. Thanks. I think I'll have to be going," answered Hakon, who honestly required solitude in which to reflect. "I'll take a walk across the park before I go to the hotel. Rather fine weather we're having this spring."

He was saying anything; it mattered little how it sounded. Graystone understood his embarrassment, and liked him the better for it. Embarrassment, like honesty, makes a man the easier to handle. He helped his guest on with his coat, and walked with him out through the hall to the door.

"Good-night," he said, offering his hand. "Don't forget that a man in this world can have anything he wants—anything!" He paused, then added, succinctly: "It's up to you."

It was yet another drop of poison, insidious as death itself.

Before his eyes the departing guest in fancy saw the written words:

"John Adams Hakon, President of the United States of America."

It intoxicated his senses. It bore home the recklessness incident to all such mental phenomena. His great, impersonal resolve was quite submerged in the purely personal elation of his being.

"Good-night," he said. "Kindly say good-night for me to Miss Graystone."

III

JOHN HAKON, stripped of political honors or duties, was comparable to a fine ship stripped of its rudder—quivering with all the power of driving-engines, but running at danger of destruction, unsteered by any hand of wisdom, devoid of any power to guide himself. For five years he had been in this condition.

During all this time he had run his engines day and night, charging blindly straight ahead, veering, reversing, clearing away from annihilation by a force of obstinate will and honesty, but ever a harborless, roving mechanism, a torment to himself and a menace to his kind.

He was now forty-three, with the fire of thirty in his eager blood and the craft of sixty thrust immaturely upon him. He had sounded an axiom of American politics, that to win one must join with the winners. And the winners, he knew, were the moneyed powers.

He had been wrenched in violence from his hold on statesmanship; he had since undergone every temptation possible to a man so passionately devoted to politics and so extraordinarily gifted, as to pique and excite his foes eternally. Corruption also "loveth a shining mark," and therefore never since that final night, when his own father's letter had been turned as a weapon upon him, had the man been wholly free

from overtures and pressure on the part of his old-time antagonists. They had offered him almost everything in the gift of power—governorship, senatorship—finally the very presidency itself. They had come to him persuasively, and with subtle arts of sophistry, after a year of enforced political idleness, had begun to fret his soul; they had made their propositions gradually bolder, as they saw his passion increasing. At length, even tones of menace, and hints at the fact that they still possessed that letter in his father's hand, had been urged to force him into their ranks.

That their attitude destroyed the very cause for which they wrought, had never been suspected by these siren-voiced tempters. They could not know that the knowledge of his father's culpability in that bridge disaster only served to inflame Hakon's fanatical desire to immolate himself upon the shrine of public service, to wipe out the stain which he felt was laid upon his name. The brutal powers, in whose system money circulated in place of blood, could not know how bitterly that letter, or the intelligence it conveyed, still rankled in Hakon's breast. They received not so much as the slightest intuitive hint that now, when at last the man seemed fairly won over to their hopes and devices, he was, in reality, more zealously honest in his intentions towards the American people than ever before in his whole career.

The man had reached a somewhat desperate state of mind through the medium of many elements, chief among which were self-made sophistries and consuming aspirations. His passion for prominence had increased upon him steadily. He had been starved till his mind had been made ready for vio-

lence to any traditions that stood opposingly before him. Under the pressure of threat and temptation, he had finally conceived the belief that to join the ranks of his old-time foe, for the purpose of betraying them later and serving the people, was more than merely a justifiable treachery. He had seen the utter futility of fighting them openly; he had noted the methods by which they won against all opposition; he realized that only by some gigantic outflanking movement, some profound intrigue, some masterly outgeneralling, could he ever hope to hurt them for the all they had inflicted on himself and on the land.

They had forced him towards this presidential ambition. He confessed to himself that the proposition excited him tremendously. It had been a wild, vague hope in his breast since his first introduction to politics. He had realized that in no other way, save by the undue influence of these same moneyed powers could he hope to reach such a goal. A little of madness, a trifle of human weakness, and a great deal of fanatical desire to accept this office, from these corrupting hands, and then turn and rend his givers, and serve the people with absolute and even morbid honesty—these had all combined to bring the man at last to his present state of being.

To-night he knew, subconsciously, at least, that almost no condition which the Graystone forces could impose would deter him from his course. He would seem to accept almost anything—any yoke of slavish promises. He was fighting them by their own methods; there could be no midway halting in the game.

The whole affair had come about by stages so slow and imperceptible that Hakon hardly knew when it was that he had finally decided to seem to yield, for

the sake of destroying these arch conspirators against the will of the people. He had never had intentions more lofty, in all his thoughts of service to his country. Nevertheless, so strong and ingrained was his habit of honest living and thinking that he could not but halt in his thoughts to-night, as he meditated swiftly on the long line of possible pretensions he might be obliged to make before he could come to the greatest office ever bestowed by the people, from which to give them the best that lay in his being.

He could not think of sleep to-night. He paced the walks of Central Park for seven solid hours, wrapt in a storm of cogitations, and revolving in a hundred ways the project which he felt Amos Graystone had submitted. He saw at last that the score of former interviews with Graystone, Senn, and others of the following had not been either vacuous or futile, as he had hitherto somewhat believed. He saw the crafty hand of Graystone in all the press publicity which had been given to his name for months in connection with the presidential nomination. Already the shrewd boss of the bosses had conducted a quiet campaign of educating the press and the people to the thought of accepting John Adams Hakon as the party's candidate for president, and at last the puzzle of it all, to Hakon himself, was being cleared.

From all these scattering speculations his mind returned constantly to the intimate, near-by thoughts of Graystone and the things he had said to-night. What political concessions or promises the powers would require at his hands, Hakon could only surmise, in the vaguest deductions. For the present, Graystone's personal condition—marriage with his daughter—obscured all the possible others in his

mind. He had tacitly consented that, having come into the enemy's camp, he must apparently open his hands to all their conditions and obligations, and be their man to all intents. But this other—Clara Graystone for a wife!

The thought had come to Hakon like a thought of marriage to a monk. There was nothing monastic about him—simply the man had given all his mind, all his strength, to the love of politics. He had never so much as dreamed of possessing a wife; he had made no plans that any woman shared; he had fancied no goal in which a woman figured. He had climbed and been thrown backward and was planning to climb anew, quite alone. A mental celibacy had become his habit—and here was his cell abruptly forced, and the door flung wide to the instreaming light of a marital possibility, with all its train of intimacies, so foreign to his modes and moods.

He thought upon it at first somewhat wildly, in a species of panic that a man might feel who encounters a something wholly unknown and therefore dreaded, at quarters so close that retreat is hardly possible. It had always taken much of Hakon's time to prepare his thoughts for radical change. Five years he had just required to make up his mind to join, apparently, with the forces of which Amos Graystone was the unit. Now he was asked to meet this new condition in "a couple of days."

His inordinate and famished ambition, however, had wrought a species of havoc in what had once been the mental bulwarks of the man's composition. It was easier now for a new condition to storm the works successfully. He had already permitted so many defeats of his cherished convictions that another, even so personal as this, was not to be instantly or

definitely repulsed. He had not, from the first, rejected the thought of marriage with Clara Graystone as impossible; he had merely tried to realize what it meant; he had endeavored to prepare the sanctum sanctorum of his inmost self to receive the weird idea. He did not entertain a notion of abandoning his scheme because of this new condition in his way.

The one element of it all that he failed to recognize was the one thing on which the craftier Graystone had counted — namely, that the presidential ambition had so possessed him and permeated his very being that he would now make almost any sacrifice to grasp the nomination. Graystone was certain his man would never get his own consent to abandon the project that had gone so far.

One further element that worked in Graystone's favor lay in the fact that never in his life had Hakon experienced a passion of the heart. There was no other woman in the way. He thought of this himself to-night. Moreover, he felt he would probably never know what it is to undergo the spell of a passion great and consuming. He could, therefore, if necessary, enter a species of partnership with any good, intelligent woman who commanded respect from himself and the world at large.

To-night he recalled, for the first time in thirty years, the one childish "affair" he had ever undergone, when at the age of twelve he had "liked" a little girl slightly older than himself. And "liked" was entirely adequate to express the utmost he had felt at the time. He remembered, imperfectly, the little Ruth Chester, a daring, bright, impetuous Miss, who had shown the courage to deny all her own high hopes, in a contest at school, to help him achieve an ambition.

He smiled at the thought of that boyish ambition, to-night. He smiled again at the thought of the frightened way in which he had "liked" Ruth Chester —and at the kiss he had wanted, and never dared to take—then of his hastening onward with ambitions. What price the Fates might have exacted, had he taken that kiss—who could know?

But he swung back stubbornly to thoughts of Clara Graystone. He pictured her carefully in all the lights and shades she had exhibited to-night and on former occasions, since their brief and apparently significant acquaintance had begun. He could see nothing forbidding at which to revolt: yet neither could he fashion a hope that she might yet develop a charm that would prove a compensation for the shock to his method of life that her entrance into his house of houses would mean. He chafed, he had moments of indignation in which his pride was threatening to become implacable, but it shrivelled in the heat of the passion that the presidential promise was fanning. In one thought he felt he should pay the Graystone price for his coveted bauble, while in the next he determined only to seem to yield and to fight the proposition off with all the cunning he could conjure to his aid.

Whatever occurred, he knew he must see Miss Clara in this latest light, regard her with eyes thus peculiarly sharpened. He must appraise her anew, since she might, in time, become his own. There was likewise the element of her own opinion in the matter —her consent to, or disapproval of, the plan. This thought came as one of relief to his mind. He hoped she might refuse him. At least, she must be given a fair opportunity of doing what her heart and nature prompted.

There was still another side of the question to be argued, but to-night he occupied himself with the personal part of it only.

Half angered, yet blinded by the brilliance of the outlook, he went his way homeward at last. It was nearly four in the morning. He slept till eight. After breakfast he 'phoned to Amos Graystone.

"I called you up," he said, "to say that I'm planning a run in my car, for an hour or two, and I wondered if perhaps Miss Graystone would care to go along."

"Hold the wire," answered Graystone. "I'll see."

When he had "seen," his answer came back, succinctly:

"Hello, Hakon," he said. "You're on."

IV

AN automobile and a woman have not a few attributes in common. Dangers are possible at any moment with either. Hakon found that a car may not be precisely the setting in which a man would study the physical appearance of a woman, particularly while he himself is engaged in operating the mechanism, but that at least it affords an opportunity for estimating certain of a fellow-occupant's characteristics.

Hakon was not a New-Yorker; he knew almost no one in the great city. He had been here less than a month, during which time he had made himself acquainted more with roads than with people, in his studious effort to avoid publicity. To-day he drove his machine with a directness and certainty which might readily have been mistaken for recklessness. He knew his power over steering-wheel and throttle; he loved the sense of his mastery. It almost seemed as if he imposed a cruelty, a tyranny upon the enslaved engine, by way of gratification to his fretted being, that no longer dominated men or weighty incidents.

Had he wished to humiliate the senseless steel beneath his hand, or break the spirit of this monster of dynamic force, he could hardly have checked the percussive creature more breathlessly close to a score of perils during the course of his run. He

gave it apparent freedom for its maddest whims of devastation, he tempted it, goaded it towards its natural diabolism, only to curb it savagely in the midst of its dash upon ruin. The snarl of its gears, beneath his baffling grip, was music in his ears.

Beside him Clara Graystone sat in calm that Hakon found commendable. There was no convulsive catching at his arm as they sped into moving jaws of vehicles that seemed to threaten doom; there was not a gasp of breath, howsoever small, to denote a timidity in her bosom or a lack of confidence in her mind. She admired the man's obvious mastery of the car; she felt a singular tremor of excitement and pleasure, thus to be seated at his side and wholly consigned to his protection.

Only once, upon entering the car, had Hakon looked steadily upon Miss Graystone's face and figure. In that look he had taken a rapid and accurate inventory. She was gowned in that manner of rich yet simple magnificence that denotes the woman long accustomed to the use of wealth. The texture, style, and fit of her brown velvet costume bespoke the final achievement of art, both in weaving and making. Her hat, of gorgeous brown, was at once a contribution to her dress and a completion of her personality. Of all of this Hakon was sensible. He was grateful to her, in that she offered no offence to his canons of art.

Concerning herself, he had noted the abundance of her hair, once ordinary brown, but now streaked with the gray that so frequently comes with early years upon unmated women; he had seen that her features were regular, her color healthy, rather than fine, her eyes a neutral tint, relieved by a spark of humor and animation, and that her forehead was

broad and smooth. She was a pleasant-looking woman, neither plain nor beautiful, capable, he thought, of appearing even attractive.

For her part, Miss Graystone made her studies of Hakon by instalments. She took in a little at a time of his bearing, his clean-shaven face, his deep-set eyes, his large, finely moulded mouth, and the straight, chiselled nose that added much to his natural look of defiant pride. She summed him up piecemeal, and was certain she admired every feature only less than the finally completed whole. She was glad he was taller than her father, glad he had straight, broad shoulders, yet glad he was not a large man, after all. Large men, she was quite convinced, are rarely proportionately huge in mind. She was happy in the presence of this man, not only because she knew that her father wished her to marry Hakon, and would help to bring the result to accomplishment, but also for himself. Something there was, perhaps the slight tinge of melancholy, lingering persistently about his eyes, even when he spoke, that appealed to her scheme of romanticism. She was happy, happier, indeed, than she had been since—she knew not when.

When at length the press of carriages was somewhat passed she ventured to speak.

"I am glad you run the car yourself," she said. "It must be much more enjoyable. And to have such control! Father has never run his so much as once. He prefers the chauffeur. I don't know whether he's afraid of it or what."

"I think it isn't that," said Hakon, and he glanced for a second into her eyes. "I like to run it—like it very much."

What she said in reply he did not hear. His

mind had been instantly busied with thoughts of Amos Graystone. And presently the difference between himself and Clara's father thrust itself upon his meditation. Graystone held his hand upon the levers curbing men, urging mighty forces, controlling destinies and dynasties to do his sovereign will. He had no time to handle puny cars; he left this play to hands less mighty than his own. And he, Hakon, proud but a moment since of thrusting his will upon this senseless steel—how had he fared at the larger work, and how was he come at last to the feet of the master?

It stung him. The compliment paid him by the woman at his side, with the color of wine had combined the bitterness of gall. Her father, afraid of a mere machine, while he, Hakon, politically abject on the ground, exalted himself and was exalted for this, his petty tyranny! He ground his teeth. His eyes forgot to see, as his ears were neglecting to hear. Then abruptly there was need for all his senses. He swerved the car from the path of a monster like itself, and the two things, flinging out their reeking breath of challenge, passed each other by an inch. Then Hakon knew that at least while a life was intrusted to his keeping his punier mastery was not to be despised.

"Do you care for this sort of thing?" he inquired, and again for a second he looked towards his companion.

"I think I do—very much," she answered. She wished her reply to please him.

"We shall have to go again," he murmured; and Clara felt repaid.

Their conversation after that was almost wholly of the sport, of the road, of the cars or carriages they

passed. The personal element was impractical, and to Hakon it was, as yet, quite impossible. He could not have verged upon even so much as conventional compliments, with which to begin a campaign on the heart of his charge, much less upon any actualities of wooing. He would be obliged to make his mind accustomed to the new idea, and this, he knew, would be no easy matter. He felt he had made a distinct advance in that he was now, in daylight, enabled to think of Miss Graystone as a mate. It was something to know that she was not repellent, in the light of their potential relationship. He had no doubt that a marriage may be mechanically successful, just as gears, wheels, and levers may be wedded in the unit of an engine. Meantime, Miss Graystone was more and more pleased, more and more tremulously excited by what she knew she might, at last, expect.

They emerged from Central Park at its northern end, and crossing to Riverside Drive, sped comfortably past the cliff of mansions fronting the Hudson, and passing Grant's tomb, crossed the viaduct and continued northward on Lafayette Boulevard. The trees were putting forth that first tender green that makes even hoary pillars of the forest assume the guise of youth. The grass was springing newly from the earth, its million spears upreared to the sun in the fresh, brave way only possible when the blades are new. The air was laden with billows of warmth, between stratas of chillier air, as if the advance-guards of summer marched upon the city in open order. The spirit of spring was so manifestly come that even the blind or the deaf must have known of its presence.

The heart of the woman, but not the heart of the

man, responded in gladness to the hour. Until he had come to Van Cortlandt Park, Hakon continued a northerly course. There he turned to the right. Over country-roads, through avenues of virgin trees, by isolated country-homes, past open fields, they sped, the car beneath them purring contentedly. At times Hakon threw on the speed, and they flew through the wind; again he slowed the engine down, and then Miss Graystone could speak, of the day and the wonder of finding the land so unsuggestive of the city, just behind—the city that to Hakon meant life in its crystallization of vices and virtues, sufferings and joys, privations and luxuries, wrongs and retributions.

He threaded the highways that lead to the Bronx, his car nosing swiftly, audaciously, into newer varieties of country charm at every turn, and thus completing at last a circuit of more than twenty miles, he brought his car again to Central Park, and so to the door of the Graystone home.

"I don't know when I've spent a morning so pleasantly," said Clara.

She gave him her hand. Hakon looked once again in her eyes. They were animated, almost to beauty. A glow was on her cheeks. Her smile was as honest as a child's. There was nothing of Graystone about her, he thought.

Guiding his car away, when the door of the mansion had closed, Hakon was less at peace with himself than he had been for many days. Graystone's proposition had complicated matters to an extent which could not have been foreseen through any gift of mental acumen. It was not a possible thing for Hakon to deceive a woman, let the ends be what they might. A certain compassion for Clara had

come to his breast. She was less than a daughter and no more than a tool in her father's inventory of assets; she would be sacrificed to any manner of grief that her father's machinations might require.

During the hours elapsed since his talk with Graystone, Hakon had seen many phases of the situation not revealed at the first inspection of this, the newest scheme. He could not discover how it would be possible for him to marry Clara Graystone, and then, as Graystone's son-in-law, defy the man and all that he represented, when once elected by these forces to the presidential chair, if it finally came to such an achievement. Yet that was what the situation apparently demanded.

The man was tempted to abandon the proposition in its entirety. Such a course would have been possible six months earlier; now the hour was late. Graystone had done his work too well. During all these weeks, for half a year, Hakon's mind had been more and more persuaded to the idea of his candidacy. The press had juggled his name into juxtaposition with rumors of the nomination and the White House with art so consummate that the entire nation was accustomed to view the suggestion with more than merely patience. His old-time record had been conjured back to public notice with the utmost skill. His own consuming ambition had been re-ignited till the glow and heat were searing the very logic of compunction in his being. He was thoroughly inflamed. His passion for prominence had never been greater. He had never heard more clearly the call of high destiny, nor had he ever before felt so confident of the fact that he was an instrument selected for the loftiest public service.

To ask a starving creature to abandon food, spread

temptingly and freely for its use, would have been no more unreasonable than to require of Hakon that he leave his banquet now. In addition to his great political hunger, the man experienced the keenest memory of wrongs inflicted on himself and on the people he had served and wished to serve with all his finest faculties. Moreover, he had come to his present apparent compromise with the Graystone forces with the fullest knowledge that he would suffer, personally, for almost every act which the game entailed.

The paramount idea, as well as ideal, in his mind, was of sacrificing himself for the cause to which he was devoted—the cause of serving the people from the very camp of the people's deadliest enemy. He had calculated fully on being misunderstood, perhaps even reviled—at least until the largeness of his purpose should be at length revealed. The fanatical wish of the martyr to endure every personal torture possible, for the principles he espouses, is comparable to the spirit in which John Hakon had begun, at least, the semi-dubious counter-machinations by which he intended to serve his land. He could suffer, he could be misunderstood, for the end, he knew, would finally justify his means, in the eyes of all the people.

He had not expected that he might be obliged to play the rôle of a son-in-law defiant to a wife's father and to all his wishes, especially after receiving the coveted office at his hands. That position and situation would be galling indeed. Yet by the very poignancy of the suffering it might inflict upon him, he felt that he could not shrink from the task. He did not admit to himself that the poison of ambition had so entered his soul that he could not relinquish the presidential promise, held so alluringly before

him, but subconsciously he knew that this was true. He would serve the people—he would serve his land! He would outwit, outflank, outgeneral these deadly, insidious foes of decency and right! This was his cry. This was the sophistry that bore him on and made him forget himself as well as Clara.

When his thought reverted to Miss Graystone, he consoled himself with the natural reflection that her father's utter carelessness of her happiness must be far more difficult to bear than anything that mere political wrangles might ever lay at her door. And if the game required a marriage between herself and him, he would do his very utmost to make her a happy, contented wife — which, after all, was, or should be, the ultimate desire of any woman.

Meantime, by virtue of the craftiness which Graystone had taught him and was teaching more and more with every passing day, Hakon determined to spare both Clara and himself, so far as lay in his power. If the thing resolved itself down to a bargain and sale, then at least he would make no payments until something should be delivered. There would be no actual engagement to marry Clara until the powers should deliver the nomination. After that there should be no marriage until after the autumn election should complete the entire transaction. This was the compromise with which he stilled compunction.

V

DURING the next ten days the press made the startling discovery that the "dark horse," hitherto a mere possibility in the culminating presidential game, had suddenly assumed a new and tremendous strength. John Hakon, the once famous senator from beyond the Alleghanies, was more than ever in the field, a virile menace to the nomination of Brevoort and a factor of appalling dimensions to Brevoort's support. "John Hakon, formerly a knife in the side of the trusts and the giants of wrong, now girded with a new, mysterious power, might again, as perhaps a somewhat rusted blade, infinitely more deadly than before, be plunged to the hilt between the ribs of iniquity."

Hakon himself read these utterances respecting his oncoming boom with amazement. Later he knew that the source of information to the public was Graystone, hidden so far away behind his devices, that no one would have dreamed of putting hounds upon his trail to come upon the truth.

The greater Hakon's enmity to wrong had been in the past, the greater would be his chances of winning the nomination now. Graystone knew this as well as he knew that the way most certain to the public's favor of the Hakon idea was to keep alive the impression that the man was still an instrument of death and torture to corporation monstrosities and all their brood of whelps.

In all this new impetus to his candidacy Hakon saw that Graystone was keeping faith—that the huge machine, long before set in motion, and performing quiet miracles, was now to be accelerated to a speed irresistible. What it could accomplish with its massive wheels and levers he had seen in the past. He thrilled to think that its mighty power was now evoked to crush all obstacles to his own nomination and to bear him onward with ponderous yet dexterous certainty to the very gates of the White House at Washington itself.

Meantime he had seen Clara but twice. His visits at the Graystone house must not be made so frequently as to come to the notice of any one who might thus early evince an interest in his movements. This was a Graystone precaution. Indeed, Hakon found that it was Graystone who would manage his entire campaign, in person; Graystone who would dictate his every public utterance—if any were made—Graystone, whose mighty genius for politics and finance had made him first an emperor of a State's gigantic organization, and later the sword-hand and sceptre and mind of an aggregation of capital, the like of which has left no record in all the history of the world.

With all this actuation of machinery, however, Graystone was not yet content. If he could draw in the chiefs and sachems, bosses and "heelers" of a system as vast as the country itself—if he could pump the gold and silver, in lieu of blood, through every political artery, even to the smallest capillary that a remote country committee represented—if he could do all this, he could still take the time to ensnare John Hakon more firmly in his schemes. That he had already prepared his daughter's mind,

if he had not, indeed, imposed his will upon her every mood and movement in this singular affair, Hakon had not as yet comprehended. He merely saw that her consent was obviously ready for whatsoever might happen, and that, further, she evidently welcomed any manner of attentions which he might see fit to bestow.

The one apparently sincere feature of the business was, in fact, her satisfaction with the trend of affairs. She had never known the flattery of being upon the verge of wifehood before, owing to the severities of her father, and while she had once had one ardent admirer, she had been somewhat neglected. Merely to be looked upon by a man like Hakon in the light of his present attentions, would have been a compliment sufficient to excite her nature, even without the prospect of entering the White House by his side, at last, the very first lady in the land. In her present flutter of perturbation and eagerness she was beginning already to reveal why she had never attracted a particularly worthy mate to seek her company.

These things made Hakon feel ashamed. Her developing superficialities awoke his resentment, just as her supposed simplicity and innocence in all the affair constrained him to despise her father more thoroughly than ever. His first spontaneous compassion for her position and helplessness in the arrangement was made to dwindle by her very attitude itself.

"She wants to be friends," he told himself repeatedly, in his need of consolation, and to this he added, with grim significance: "Perhaps I shall need a friend."

He had made up his mind, however, to go on. He no longer feared that any later defiance of her father's political wishes, when once the White House had been reached, would inflict particular pain on Miss

Graystone. She would be far more likely to rejoice in his defeat of her father's purposes—such was her inherited nature. This afforded a something analogous to comfort in his mind. What further balm he required for his writhing pride and his ever-haunting, half-accusing sense of honor, he found every day in the public coupling of his name with the gossip of the presidency and the oncoming national convention. Every word of this nature that came to his attention now was an oil on the flames of his one consuming passion. Some manner of passion must every strong nature know; and the passion of ambition has burned full many a bridge behind its devotee. Having been drawn and forced on, step by step, for five long years, then courted and baited for twelve exciting months, the last six of which had inflamed him inordinately, Hakon was now like a famished creature permitted just one taste of ravishing food—he could not resist the passion in his vitals to snatch the offered feast.

To find that Clara was not precisely worthy of the nobler instincts he had felt towards her position did not in the least detract from his resolve to treat her with the utmost consideration possible. He could not wholly eliminate his feeling of relief, however, when he knew she would never take particularly to heart any breach which might develop between himself and her father. Never, in the blindness of his all-absorbing ambition, did he once relinquish his main, actuating purpose—that of taking whatsoever the Graystone forces could secure, and then, when safely elected, turning to rend them, in the name of the people, whose servant and servant only he wished so fervently to be.

This Wednesday afternoon had been set apart by

the fates as a time in which to exert themselves concerning John Hakon's affairs. He was trying to work at his office—where, upon coming to New York, he had quietly ensconced himself—when a messenger came to his door with a letter requiring an answer.

The missive contained a surprise in the simple fact that it proved to be from the hand of a former friend —a Walter Breeme, who had been a young, enthusiastic comrade in those other political days, now five long years receded, and who was still keenly alive to the needs of national reform.

The letter was short. It contained a chortle of glee, for had not he, Walter, once more discovered his beloved champion of right? And he would be around at six, to take him first to dinner, then to the play, for which he had tickets in his pocket. "Unless you've got something vastly more important, old man, send word by return that you'll be on hand," was the way the epistle concluded.

Hakon read the note with pleasure. He had been rather more than merely fond of Breeme five years before, and great New York was a lonely desolation. To see such a friendly face, and to know where the man had been and what he had done would be a pleasure indeed. That he could not expect to avoid all the old friends of the past, Hakon knew very well. Later on—until, at least, they should know his intent, in allying himself with the Graystone powers—how many old-time friends would wish to seek him out?

For this once, if never again, however, he would quaff at companionship. He sat down and wrote a brief note, accepting his friend's invitation. The messenger carried the answer away. Then Hakon remained seated in his chair for fifteen minutes

thinking. The whole past—those days he had once thought glorious, even in his harsh defeat—came trooping back upon him. The dream ended, as always, with that final night when that letter, in his own father's hand-writing, had dealt him such a blow. That letter! Could he ever blot it out by any deed of sacrifice and suffering for the great, confiding public who delegate the making of their bridges, their laws, their government, to men in whom they trust?

A ring at the 'phone interrupted his reverie. It was Graystone who spoke through the wire.

"Perhaps you can stroll in and see me this afternoon—say at three," said the voice. "That's all. Good-bye."

Much as it sounded like a casual suggestion, Hakon interpreted the utterance as a chief's command. Having met Graystone anywhere save at his office, in all his previous interviews, he was now a trifle excited by the prospect of beholding the man in his very seat of empire. He could not conjecture what the need for a meeting might imply, but he hoped that a little of the darkness in which his campaign was being incubated might at last be somewhat dispelled.

It was about a twenty-minute trip down Broadway to the building that Hakon sought. At three o'clock he was waiting outside the inner sanctum where Graystone presided.

Graystone kept him waiting. He was sure that waiting is good for all the ambitious. At the end of an hour he sent forth a youth, who conducted the one-time senator into the pivot room of power.

"Hello, John. Sit down," said Graystone, scribbling on a pad. "Just a minute." He had adopted

the new mode of address as befitting a father-in-law prospective. The tone in which he pronounced the name John, however, gave Hakon little pleasure.

"Nice offices," was all that he said.

In the days when he had been a power himself he had dreamed of no such luxury, despite his wealth.

Graystone drew open a drawer and took forth a bale of letters, the purport of which, one by one, he scanned with a keen, cold glance.

"John," he said, continuing his task uninterruptedly, "your forces wish to meet you soon."

Hakon's heart was suddenly pounding.

"All right," he answered, as calmly as possible. "Where?"

"Here."

The thought of such "forces" as would come together here—the silent, vital centre of commercial, as well as political, omnipotence, gave Hakon a feeling akin to awe. And the "forces" were his! He spoke with difficulty.

"All right," he repeated. "When?"

Graystone pawed over thirteen letters swiftly, giving to each a scrutiny that seemed to concentrate his entire train of faculties. He had not, apparently, heard his visitor's question. When Hakon despaired of diverting his attention once more to the business in hand, Graystone abruptly said:

"To-morrow."

Hakon answered: "Oh!" In a moment he started to add: "I think there is nothing in the way to prevent—" when Graystone interrupted.

"I was thinking—" he cut in, sharply, and there he paused and pecked at the letters with his quick thumb and finger, as before, while Hakon waited.

After a time that seemed devised for torture the older man abruptly demanded:

"Engaged yet—to be married?"

Hakon was taken wholly by surprise. He had expected no such abruptness.

"Well, I— A woman— Any unseemly haste—" he faltered.

"She's ready," interrupted Graystone. "After a woman gets the notion, she's ready in less than five minutes."

Hakon was past amazement. To know that Miss Graystone was "ready" did not surprise him, it somewhat disgusted. A dormant wrath, bequeathed him from his old spirit of defiance, arose in his being. Without stopping to think of the consequences he demanded:

"What do you expect, Mr. Graystone, in case I should fail to get the nomination?"

Graystone did not even glance up from his work.

"Bets all off," he said, bluntly.

Hakon experienced relief and mental nausea together. The whole affair was so baldly sordid. Had Graystone purchased his daughter in the market, to hold for a profitable sale, he could hardly have treated her matrimonial arrangements with more business callousness.

He added, bluntly: "Are you going to get busy?"

"I only thought—" started Hakon, as before.

"No use to see your forces till you are qualified," interposed his dictator, coldly, and he still continued to inspect those letters, each of vital importance, each concerning a new and distinct ramification of business or political manœuvring.

Hakon colored. He made a motion as if to smooth a mustache which he had not worn since his youth.

He knew that Graystone simply meant that he must make a proposal of marriage to Clara before tomorrow morning. He had made up his mind that there should be no actual engagement until after the national convention should meet and offer him the nomination. At the most, a tacit agreement, between himself and Graystone, was all that he could bring himself to sanction. He was aware that women regard broken pledges and broken hearts as very much the same thing, and altogether cruel and shameless.

He thought of many things in a very brief time. Indignation arose in his being at the manner of Graystone's disgusting traffic in his own daughter's fate and happiness. He reflected, suddenly, what the cost of refusal to meet this demand might mean. But with a woman's fate interlocked with the situation, only honor and the dictates thereof could enjoy a hearing in his brain. Let Graystone snatch back the presidential prize if he must, there could be no trifling with even the shallow Clara's hopes or affections.

"Do you mean," he said, "that in the event of any accident by which we may lose the nomination, your daughter would be released at once from all obligation to become my wife?"

Graystone answered: "Didn't I tell you once before that it's my ambition to see her the wife of a president? This is not the only campaign we'll ever see, and you're not the only man of prominence."

Hakon was made almost recklessly angry by the sheer brutality of this reply.

"I must have misled you somewhere along the route," he said, calmly enough, despite his indignation. "I am not an absolute whelp. There can be

neither sense nor gentlemanly conduct in my asking Miss Clara to engage herself to me as you suggest until after a successful issue of the national convention."

Graystone looked at him with a frown on his eagle-like visage.

"Hakon," he demanded, sharply, "do you mean that you refuse to propose to my daughter until after I get you the nomination?"

Hakon met his stare unflinchingly. "I do," he said, deliberately, and expecting instant dismissal of the entire presidential project. "I propose to remember that your daughter is a woman."

Graystone felt the sting, and was adequately angered. He continued to eye his man in that domineering, compelling way of his for half a minute. Then he suddenly realized why Hakon had been so hard to slay before, and how much harder now would be the task of reducing his final fortress of manhood.

Had Graystone been the only representative of finance desiring a fore-purchased president at Washington, he would doubtless have flung the whole thing out of his window in his wrath. As it was, he knew that his personal resentment in the matter would be but a poor excuse to offer his associates, if the game with Hakon were now to be suddenly abandoned. They had gone too far, they had spent too much money, during the six months past, to accept any such miserable fiasco in patience. It was also too late to shift to any other possible candidate, even were another man so strong or capable or prominent as Hakon to be found. No, anger could avail him nothing. His man must be handled with care.

"I suppose you know, John, that I can stop the whole business in a minute, and knock your chances of becoming president into a cocked hat without the slightest trouble?" he said. "You are on to that?"

"Fully," answered Hakon.

"Do you also remember that Senn is still in possession of that letter written by your father?"

Hakon was not to be terrified, for long before they had backed him up against a wall, so to speak, where he had become dangerous to press.

"That threat has grown too cold from over-use," he said. "I will not be moved from this present resolution."

Graystone saw in a flash how readily he could make a grave mistake with a man so peculiarly crystallized about certain notions of honor. After all, they could afford to leave him his code of honor towards women, since a man of his caliber certainly must require, for some inscrutable reason, some pretence, at least, of rectitude.

"I wasn't making a threat, John," said the older man, in a more conciliatory tone. "You and I have made a bargain, that's all, and I expect you to keep your part of it faithfully."

"No, you expect me to pay my part of the price anyway, whether you perform your promises or not," corrected Hakon. "When you land the nomination, that will certainly be a reasonable time to talk of this engagement."

Graystone was pawing again at the letters on his desk. It was work that his secretaries, one after another, had passed along for his inspection, and it had to be done this afternoon.

"You're not so sure as I am of landing that nom-

ination, I see," he observed, coldly, in a moment. "If you knew how much— But that's none of your concern. How do I know you may not refuse to get engaged when I've landed the goods?"

"You will have my word," answered Hakon. He was suddenly excited, in an overwhelming way of reaction, by the prospect of this gigantic political coup. Graystone's confidence in his ability to secure him the nomination communicated itself to the eager ex-senator in resistless waves.

"You'll give me your word that the moment you receive the nomination you'll propose to Clara?" said Graystone. "That's understood between us, man to man?"

Hakon was silent for a moment. He was looking Graystone squarely in the eyes.

"Yes," he said, slowly, "that is understood."

"All right," responded the older man, briskly. "I shall want you to meet some people soon. I'll 'phone you in the morning if there's anything doing. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," answered Hakon, and he left the room.

Half an hour later Graystone also departed. When he arrived at his house he summoned Clara to his study.

"You and Hakon are engaged to be married," he said. "We fixed it up at the office just this afternoon. He'll break it to you later on."

He knew that he could trust her to reveal so much of her knowledge to Hakon that his high sense of honor would hold him hard and fast.

VI

THEY were mingled emotions that continued to surge through Hakon's being as he made his way back to the office. He knew he had won a small but significant triumph; he was less afraid of Graystone and his power. Nevertheless, he felt himself more firmly bound in the bargain than before, and a vague unrest was on him with the knowledge.

Beneath as well as above it all, however, was the billowing excitement which possessed him as he reverted, time after time, to reflections of how actual this presidential promise was becoming. All else sank in mist that could only veil the main, important fact. President! President! Once that, and they should feel the true weight and strength of a mighty defiance. They should see for once what a president may do.

Up and down and up and down he paced in the office that could not bound his thoughts. Thus he was stalking back and forth when Breeme came in upon him.

Breeme was the same boy, ruddy of cheek and optimistic, full to the brim with belief in the ultimate virtue of man, overflowing as ever with confidence in his own final triumph over enemies of great reforms.

He talked all the way to the restaurant, and all through the dinner, about himself. He forgot that

Hakon was, perhaps, the coming president; forgot a hundred things he really wished to remember, in his boyish, honest, even modest recital of what had happened to himself. It was modest because it was not in the least like boasting; it was tales of his failures; it was all, however, selfish, for it all concerned Walter Breeme. Hakon knew the trait of old. He knew it would presently pass, for Breeme, once started, was obliged to go on, to finish his story. When it was done, however, he would show another phase, thoughtful, inquiring, fond. Meantime it was all distinctly fresh and amusing.

A greater contrast than the two men afforded is seldom seen. Hakon's hair, naturally black, was a trifle gray, though abundant, his eyes were deep-set and bluish gray, his coloring was only that of health. His mouth, though firm, was large and of pleasant expression. Breeme had little hair, a "ripple" in his nose, a round face, rosy as an apple, and thin, red lips curved with smiling. His greenish eyes had a quick, nervous way of shifting right and left, as he looked one first in the right eye, then in the left, with the baffling rapidity of an alternating current.

"I went up to Albany—maybe you heard of it, maybe not," said he towards the end of his story. "Went as assemblyman from the Sunday-school ward of Brooklyn, as they call it in a local organization as rotten as Tammany Hall; and, Hakon, I give you my word I tried my damnedest—and didn't do a thing. I didn't accomplish anything. I had three pet bills, reforms I had promised to compel. And at first a number of those fellows promised to stand as pat as a mud-pie, only to come to me in a day or two and ask my support, by way of trading even, for measures of graft so shameless they'd bring a

blush to the fur of a cat that had just devoured the Sunday porterhouse. Well, I couldn't stand for that, and I said so. Then, of course, they withdrew their support from my pets, and I tried to put them through alone. Say! They called one my 'measure to prevent the moon from shining on Sunday nights.' That didn't help it. But you ought to see the way they can shatter the skull and bend the ribs and puncture the stomach of a bill when they try! Bill introduced? 'Move we put it on the table.' Bing! Where am I now? Committee work? Finest legerdemain ever invented. Say, Hakon, a pigeon-hole is a place where things are laid that mustn't be hatched. I came back to my constituency. 'What have you done?' 'Well, not so very much, of course, but next session—' 'Oh, hell!' They can say 'hell' even in the Sunday-school ward. I look like a good imitation of a dub. But I haven't got through with them yet."

They were pushing away the emptied coffee-cups. Hakon leaned back in his chair, Breeme leaned forward on the table.

"I'll tell you, old man," he went on, gleefully, "we've got the greatest field for reform work here in New York State that ever was mapped for systematic boodling. The predatory rich and the predatory political, working hand-in-hand, regardless of party, have temporarily got us skinned to a cherry-stone, and they may remember the meat inside the stone at any minute. Now, then, the thing to do—"

"I was going to ask," interrupted Hakon, a slight color burning for a moment in his cheeks. "I was thinking—you can only cut a diamond with diamond dust; and sometimes fire must be fought with fire."

"These fellows aren't diamonds," said Breeme,

with a gesture of scorn for the enemies whose work had outmatched him. "They're glass, raw glass, cut from the bottom of a soda-water bottle. But they're big; and big, flashy things take the public eye. You used to fight their fire with good old water pretty well — till they severed your main." He laughed. All defeats, either his or those of his friends, sat easily upon him.

"The point is," resumed Hakon, who was merely feeling his way towards supplying a justification for his own position, "you admit these fellows do attract the public."

"Or buy them—sheep, poultry, and pigs."

"Or buy them," agreed Hakon. "They get them. The public are with them. And without the public—or at least the power represented by the public—what can a man accomplish?"

Breeme said: "I have often thought of adopting the expedient of working with the gang — working, I mean, in their ranks—appearing to be one of the outfit. It frequently succeeded in a gang of the old-time, honest thieves you read about."

"I thought you would think of that some day," said Hakon, and he emptied his glass of water to avoid the look of his comrade's eyes.

"Say!" exclaimed the younger man. "I'm an ass! What's this talk of you for president? That's what I wanted to hear, and I've been gushing crude oil all the evening. How did it happen? Who's dragging the blushing and unwilling bride to the altar? Don't you want to be interviewed by a reporter friend of mine?"

His mixed metaphors were not a little disconcerting, as Hakon thought while swiftly revolving an answer.

"Well," he said, slowly, "no, I'll forego any interviews for a while, I think. It's a little soon yet, as a matter of fact, to count on anything."

"But I see you are partial to 'iniquity's ribs,' as of yore," answered Breeme, with a healthy laugh. "Rusted knife and all that—and what a gangrened stab a rusty blade would make! Great work! Good talk; but can you get the nomination with the corporate interests all arrayed against you?"

Hakon could make no more efforts towards even a partial disclosure of his attitude. Breeme was distressingly uncompromising in his faith that the old-time policy was still in force.

Swallowing another gulp of water, Hakon answered, "I hope to have some influential friends."

Fortunately Breeme never long pursued a topic that trended away from the main large facts.

"Honkey!" said he, as he had when a boy. "To think I'm dining with you here and talking along, and perhaps you're going to be the president! It's wonderful what a welcome you've had in the press already. Your old record shines like a nickel-plated star. If you get there, old man, what about the cabinet positions? A friend who's in need is a friend who'll bleed. If nobody else wants to be secretary of agriculture, why—you know I once learned to milk a cow."

The slight smile that passed over Hakon's face was Breeme's reward.

"We'll see," said the possible candidate. "What time does your play commence?"

"Say, we've got to hurry!" ejaculated Breeme, and, rising, he snatched for his coat and hat.

VII

BREEME'S seats were in a box, the second from the stage in the lower tier. Hakon, when he made this discovery, would gladly have retreated from a position so exposed to the public gaze. A moment later, however, a mental reaction made him glad of the conspicuous location of his seat. This gladness, moreover, was his natural emotion in such a situation. His nature craved attention—prominence. As he settled himself in a gilded chair, something of the old sense of power, self-confidence, and aloofness from the common herd made quick his pulse, made wine of his blood.

They were late. The play would presently commence; the orchestra was finishing the overture. Hakon, seated next to the low partition that separated their box from the one that was nearer the stage, permitted his glance to travel quietly over the house—as often it had done in the senate at Washington when he rose to make a speech. On his neighbors in the box on the left he had not, as yet, bestowed so much as a glance. The flutter of life below him, the close-packed layer of people presented to his view, awoke a thrill in his veins as he thought of his power to stir them were the time and the opportunity bestowed upon him. And these were people of means, people who would pay him intelligent homage when the hour of hours should at length arrive.

His eyes were blazing, his cheeks were warm with color, a look of exalted austerity, power, nobility seemed chiselled on his striking face. Sublimated by reflections of the all that lay in his soul—the all he was yearning and trying to do for the people that he really loved — he was unaware of the fixed and fascinated gaze that a splendidly beautiful young woman in the box next his own was directing on his countenance.

When the music ceased, the spell upon the man was disarranged. He turned a look towards the stage, and thereby encountered the glance of a soft, brown pair of eyes, looking straight into his so intently that they could not, for a moment, be averted. It was a wonderful look, a long, intense, extraordinary look. In that moment his own eyes, held by some singular potency greater than his will, were gifted with sight that seemed to fathom depths and heights and widths of existence comprising a world in a new and mysterious space of which the man had never dreamed. His sensation was unique; it was like a momentary dizziness, a whirl asunder from all previous knowledge — a glimpse into realms hitherto unconceived.

This mental peculiarity lasted but the briefest time. Subconsciously the man was aware of a beautiful face, flushing warmly with embarrassment, of a mass of mahogany-colored hair, aglint with light, of an exquisite mouth and an arching pair of brows. The eyes, or the look in the eyes it was, however, that had worked some transmigration of his mental attributes as fleeting as it was inexplicable. He felt himself rushing back to himself, baffled, bewildered by what he had seen, and not seen, half read and less than half comprehended;

then—the curtain arose, and the eyes were turned away.

For a moment Hakon continued to stare where that gaze had been. He saw, in a dim confusion, the profile of a young woman exquisitely beautiful; and from this as a nucleus he formulated things mundane, and presently came to his normal intelligence. He passed his hand across his forehead and down his cheek, after which he gave his attention to the play.

It was "Much Ado About Nothing" that was being presented. Hakon had seen it years before; it therefore returned to his memory like a friend whose traits, almost forgotten, reveal themselves anew in a way half surprising, half familiar, and altogether charming. He tried to give it his attention, but despite himself he found his eyes and mind astray from the story and wandering constantly back to the figure so near him in the neighboring box.

He frowned in annoyance. What was the meaning of such an encounter? What were those strange, impalpable fragrances he had almost fancied he caught, and what those revelations to his mind, utterly evanescent, that refused to be conjured again? Had recent worry brought him a mental disorganization, a symptom of which had happened to be coincident with that young woman's glance? Or might it have been a species of hypnotism, made possible by some accidental concatenation of events? He remembered a man who had once worked a partial hypnotic influence upon him when a boy—an experience which had made him angry—and he felt a half resentment against this unknown young woman. The entire incident was disconcerting, especially in that it would not subside to the caverns of forgetful-

ness. In a dogged way he focussed his thoughts on the comedy. It was not until the act was nearly ended that he felt his gaze drawn to a strip of bevelled mirror, secured against the side of the neighboring box—and there he met again the gaze of those soft, brown eyes.

It was only a flash, not a lingering interchange of glances, that occurred on this occasion, and Hakon did not divine that the mirror had served the strange young woman's purposes before, hence his feeling of discomfort and peculiarity was only a little increased. He did find, however, that the mirror demanded his attention, repeatedly before the act was concluded, and although he could not again surprise the reflected eyes therein, nevertheless he was still somewhat nettled and bewildered.

In the modest applause that followed the fall of the curtain, a man looked in at the rear of Breeme's box, saw Hakon, and excused himself for making the trifling mistake of entering other precincts than his own. He was withdrawing towards the other box when Breeme looked up and saw him.

"Why — Hobart!" he cried. "Here — Hobart — come in. Where'd you come from? Why, say! I'm mighty glad to see you! Where were you going?"

Hakon arose, as Breeme had done.

"I'm late, that's all, and came and looked in your box by mistake," said Hobart, shaking Breeme's extended hand. "How are you, anyway? This is an unexpected pleasure, old fellow. Have you spoken to the folks?"

"Where? In the box?" said Breeme. "Why, I didn't notice who it was. We were late ourselves."

Hobart said: "Then won't you come in now, and bring your friend?"

"Well, yes. This is Mr. Hakon, Paul," answered Breeme. "Mr. Hakon, Mr. Hobart. Excuse me for not presenting you sooner. Hakon, you know, is the man they're talking of for president—dark horse and all that. He doesn't look the part—when he travels with me, I suppose; but here, let's see Mrs. Hobart. That's better, if possible, than seeing you."

The stir in the box so near her own had not been lost upon the interested young woman divided from Hakon by the low partition. She had cast one look at the men when they rose. She had seen Mr. Hobart, and her color had brightened. She had heard a little of Breeme's introduction of his friend, including what was said concerning the presidential possibilities. She awaited the coming of the three men with honest interest.

Hakon was presented to Hobart's wife, a matronly, pleasant woman, nearing forty. He was introduced to Mrs. Hobart's mother, a quiet, elderly person, who sat far back from the public gaze. Then he found himself being made acquainted with Miss Ruth Sherwood—the handsome young woman whose eyes, at least, he felt he had previously encountered.

She extended her hand with a frank cordiality, at once disarming and engaging. She looked at him fearlessly, her composure re-establishing his own remarkably. He felt as if he had made some mistake, that the wine of Breeme's dinner must have been responsible for those still-unexplained emotions of half an hour before. Certainly there was nothing confused or self-conscious—or dangerous—about Miss Sherwood. He wondered at himself. Nevertheless, despite the sense of relief he felt, there was still an indefinable something about her that he could not comprehend.

"Won't you sit here where you can see, Mr. Hakon?" she said. "Paul and Alice will rob you entirely of Mr. Breeme."

"There is not very much to see," answered Hakon, looking straight at his new acquaintance and thinking not at all of what he was saying.

She laughed quietly. "No, there isn't," she said. "But, tell me, you are not by any good-fortune Mr. John Adams Hakon, I suppose?"

Hakon looked at her in a new surprise.

"I felt that I must have known you," he answered, more puzzled than ever. "But—yes, that is my whole name, of course. Do I really know you? Have we met before? It seems as if I start to remember, then—I'm quite sure I've never had the pleasure." A brighter light burned in his eyes. "I'll admit your advantage," he confessed. "I think I should certainly remember a name like Sherwood."

Her eyes were dancing, then grave.

She said: "Would you know the name better if I told you it all? Ruth *Chester* Sherwood."

"Ruth Chester?" he repeated, quickly. "Ruth—Then she married a Mr. Sherwood, and—"

"Yes. That is it. I'm her daughter. She told me so much about John Adams Hakon that I feel I've known you from my childhood. And I've always wished to see you for myself. I'm quite excited now that I have. I'm glad you remember—the name."

"Oh yes; I have never forgotten the name," said Hakon, passing his hand again across his brow and down his cheek. "I think I must have remembered the face—a little—or maybe the eyes."

"Forgive me if I looked at you so peculiarly,"

said Ruth, in a frankness that he found extraordinary. "I felt peculiar—I felt as if I knew you—don't you understand? It was mother's fault, I am sure."

There was such an honesty about her, such an undisguised cordiality, such an obvious wish to be upon good terms at once that Hakon felt she offered him a friendship of a new, and to him, unclassified order. It put him at his ease.

"I'm glad we've met," he admitted, as frankly as she. "Where is your mother?"

The grave look came quickly into Miss Sherwood's eyes.

"Do you believe in immortality?" she asked, in an eager way.

Hakon answered: "Yes, I'm sure I believe in her immortality. Why? She isn't—"

"Yes, that is where she is. She must be," said the girl. "It happened nearly two years ago—nine months after father went." She said it with a certain bravery that almost masked the pang of grief she evidently carried in her heart.

"Ruth Chester," said Hakon, in a momentary reverie, in which he recalled the handsome, courageous school-girl whom he had liked. "Ruth Chester."

Miss Sherwood changed the subject. "How do you like the performance?" she inquired.

Hakon came back to the present and answered, characteristically, "I generally wait till the end before I know."

His companion laughed. "It's a great deal safer, I'll admit," she said. "The end is the only thing that counts, of course." She was thinking of what the end of the year might mean to the man before her now. "After all I had heard from mother," she added, "I hoped very strongly that the Mr.

Hakon being talked of for president was her John Hakon." Finding him silent for a moment, she inquired, "Does that sound horribly forward?"

For the second time that evening the rare, faint smile that was Hakon's greatest charm came lightly to his face.

"It sounds like Ruth Chester," he answered.

And again the curtain went up on the play.

Even Hakon himself was aware of a mental stimulus he enjoyed in the presence of this singular young woman. His conversation, more than half excited by her wit and intelligence, partook more and more of gayety, effervescence, quips of humor, kernels of wisdom and general camaraderie, whensoever the curtain was down on the evening's scheduled interruption. He brought forth arts of retort and argument all but rusted in his mental garret; he burnished up his rhetoric, reviewed his vocabulary, marshalled a keen array of attributes too long neglected. He was brilliant, sparkling. He forgot himself and all his cares, entanglements, and obligations.

In half an hour they felt as if they had always been friends—if not something more. Just why it was, however, that he promised so readily to visit Ruth Sherwood on the following afternoon, he had not stopped to ponder. She had asked him to come in her straightforward way, and he merely knew he was glad, in some utterly foreign manner, for every word she spoke and every look she vouchsafed him from her eyes, although not for a second did anything even faintly reminiscent of that first remarkable glance return between them. At the end of it all, it was certainly reluctance with which he bade her good-night.

But it was not until he had parted from Breeme, and the evening slowly rolled itself backward, from incident to incident, that he suddenly found a mad, unreasoning thought in his mind.

It concerned Clara Graystone. He hoped she might repudiate her father's arrangements.

But at ten o'clock on the following morning a messenger brought him a scented epistle from the lady in question.

His visits, she said, had made her very, very happy. She hoped to see him soon.

VIII

IT is something finer, stronger, far more subtle than wine that intoxicates the soul. Despite his preoccupation with a score of conjectures, hopes, worries, and impatiences, this morning John Hakon dwelt with persistency on every look, tone, and accent that had been bestowed upon him the previous evening by Ruth Sherwood. He felt a sense of exultation, health, or wakefulness—something that he could not define or comprehend, even while he admitted to himself that he would be very glad, indeed, to see Miss Sherwood again. He was honestly unaware of what had happened to his nature, to his heart.

Until half-past ten the man remained seated in his office, blankly staring at the blotter on his desk. Eddies of thought, concerning the great game at which he was playing, arose with silent force in his flow of meditation, and gave him a thrill and sank again, as he felt himself swept onward by this newer tide of something joyous. He was thinking of a score of things, none of them definite, all of them converging illogically about Ruth Sherwood. He was aimlessly drifting with pleasant, abstract reflections.

The sharp percussion of the telephone-bell made him start. He knew when he took the receiver in his hand he should hear the voice of Amos Gray-

stone. He even guessed what the message would be, yet he required a long moment in which to collect his faculties.

"Come in at eleven. We've got to make things hum," said the voice from the temple of might.

Hakon said, "I'll start at once."

Banked fires within him suddenly broke into flame. The game, and nothing but the game, was in his mind—just as political excitement and nothing else was in his veins.

All the way down to Graystone's place he attempted to fashion the scene he would presently view—the figures of which it would be comprised. How many of his lesser gods would Graystone assemble in his pantheon? And what would they be? Gods of sugar, leather, oil, and coal, of meat, rubber, paper—ay, and of money there were, who made up the syndicate of empire, some of them known and some unknown to the man who sought their shrine. And he knew that their grimness would be the one thing apparently absent; he knew what courteous, gentlemanly fellows they were—these gods—humorous, cordial, and often lavishly generous—of everything but power. How many would they be, and what would be the total of their price?

The price! He lowered his eyes; he hardened the lines of his mouth.

It was equally exciting and far less discomforting to wonder again how many individuals he would find comprising his "forces." Perhaps six, he thought, with Graystone to count as the seventh—six new personalities, and each such a mere shade less implacable, shrewd, and inscrutable than Graystone, that balance itself would hesitate between any one of them and him. And all of these he, Hakon, had once dared to

defy; and all had found him worthy of their steel—so worthy that they welcomed him now to their midst! He clinched his fist, and held it clinched till he entered the portals of the building in which Amos Graystone had his throne.

He had fifteen minutes to wait, alone, before he was asked to appear. By force of habit he threw back his head and drew down his brows as he came to the door of the sanctum. He had never presented an appearance more striking than when the solid oaken barrier was opened by the messenger and he was bidden to enter.

Then he gazed about the room in some bewilderment. There were two people present—Graystone, busy as ever at his desk, and a woman reading a paper.

"Morning, John," said Graystone. "Pull up a chair. I want you to meet Mrs. Meshe."

Mrs. Meshe put down her paper, looked at Hakon, and nodded. She was a large, handsome woman, faultlessly dressed in becoming gray with scarlet trimmings. Her hair was bleached, and a certain hardness had marked her face, especially in its business expression. Her eyes were languorous, but, at present, as cold and gray as a chasm.

Hakon murmured some acknowledgment of the introduction. He did not realize why she was here—that she was, in fact, the accredited representative, in a way, of all his "forces."

"Have I come too early?" he said.

"We were waiting," said Mrs. Meshe, her gaze still resting upon him.

He felt his face tingling abruptly. The woman's position he divined, to some extent, in an instant. He felt himself humiliated, tricked. Indignation

flashed in his eyes. Mrs. Meshe beheld it there and liked him. She knew him at once for a species of tiger, caged, even perhaps willingly submissive, yet still a fierce, strong being who might yet batter down the bars and spring savagely across his tormentors to freedom. She admired strength of every description, and particularly pristine virility.

"Sit down, John," said Graystone, busy with business involving millions. "Mrs. Meshe's time is valuable, and I wanted her to meet you for a moment. You know you've got to be crowded down the convention's throat, and crowded suddenly."

Hakon sat down mechanically. He had come here armored to meet a set of men. To meet this woman disorganized all his preparation, all his enforced mental composure. Why he accepted a certain belief that the woman did represent certain forces he could not have explained. Doubtless Graystone's assurance in the premises affected, if it did not dominate, the entire affair.

For a minute nothing further was said by any of the trio. It was a moment of significant silence—a moment in which each was weighing the others, and adjusting relationships, as a preliminary to accepting the situation. Hakon was looking at Mrs. Meshe as curiously as she was examining him. Where or when he had seen her before, or whether he had seen some one else of the same exceptional type, he could not determine. He was conscious, however, of a something in him that acknowledged a something of power in her personality. He could feel an influence, half baneful, half sheer fascination, that emanated subtly, perhaps from her eyes, where smouldering passions indubitably had their lair. He feared her more than he feared Amos Graystone—or, at least,

in a different manner. On the other hand, he trusted her quite as much or more, subconsciously aware as he was that, at most, she was merely an instrument and not a governing intelligence. Graystone was quickly, craftily pondering the two.

"Well," he broke in, going back at his work, "how would he look in the White House?"

Mrs. Meshe smiled.

"Typical," was all she said.

Hakon felt, at being thus calmly appraised, how sordid the whole transaction was, how little his entity counted. He was stung, he was angered, and it smarted the more since that madness of aspiration within him leaped in exultation at the purport of the talk. The vulnerable spot in his armor was known, and no conceivable opiate could have brought him the exquisite joy that he felt at the thought of achieving the highest honor in the gift of the great American people.

"I think," said Graystone, "he will satisfy the traditions. Pass him up on that, and get busy, if there is anything to talk about."

Still Hakon had nothing to say. One part of his nature was too angered; the other too breathlessly excited.

Mrs. Meshe took up a scrap-book lying on Graystone's desk and held it open on her knee.

"Senator Hakon," she said, "you had quite a number of friends while you were at Washington, I see by these old accounts and stories," and she turned the pages of the carefully annotated volume in which a record of Hakon's public actions had been compiled. "I suppose some might be friendly still?"

Hakon said: "Do you mean friendly to this present business in hand?"

"Yes, it comes to that," replied Mrs. Meshe. "Are there any among these on whom you count for active support?" And she read a list of nearly thirty names.

Hakon felt sorrow, anger, contempt, and chagrin by turns as the names recalled the past to his mind and old-time friends passed in review before his judgment. In that brief time his thoughts presented a vivid epitome of things political, all more or less a negative tribute to the powers of the Graystone combination and a grief over the weaknesses of men.

"Many of these sold me out, and could doubtless be purchased anew, if required," he answered, bitterly, when the woman had finished her list. "The few who remained stanch"—he made a gesture of resignation—"they were long since disarmed."

Graystone had been working, but had lost not a word.

"The point is, Hakon," he said, "that Mrs. Meshe helps to handle the money. If you know of any one who needs money, and can be of use, why give up the names. You can't be put in the White House on a hot-air fight."

Hakon's anger burned up promptly.

"I know of no such acquaintances," he said.

"Surely, senator, some of these in this list—" started Mrs. Meshe.

Hakon interrupted curtly. "I have not consented to enter this presidential contest in this capacity. I refuse to discuss the topic absolutely."

Mrs. Meshe elevated her brows. She had seen very few individuals in her life who would dare appear so rebellious in the presence of her chief. She expected an outburst from Graystone's seat. Instead the eagle-nosed emperor chuckled.

"John is an Injun," he said. "Rather get hostile than eat. Let him alone. I guess we can manage without his friends." To himself he added: "We'll pull down his pride so hard it will make him lumpy."

Mrs. Meshe curbed a half-angry speech that arose to her lips. She too determined, mentally, that Hakon should be tamed, and her nature was excited by the thought of how it might be done. She knew her trade far too well to exhibit any feeling here. Ignoring Hakon as thoroughly as if he had failed to exist, she arose from her chair.

"Oh, Gray, by-the-way," she said to Graystone, dismissing the former topic instantly, "have you sent that magazine to Albany?"

"No," said Graystone. "Here it is." He took from a drawer three bank-notes, each with a value of ten thousand dollars. These he dropped between the leaves of a magazine that lay upon the desk before him, after which he handed the periodical to the woman. "See that one of the boys wraps it up, and you can mail it yourself," he added. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Senator Hakon," said Mrs. Meshe, extending her hand. "I congratulate you on your luck."

Hakon could not refuse to shake her hand; he had never refused such a courtesy to any one. Nevertheless, the touch of the woman's fingers, as well as the look he beheld in her eyes, added much to the feeling of resentment which the entire affair had awakened in his being. Then he found himself alone with the man who compelled the destinies.

In a moment he spoke angrily. "Graystone," he said, "who is this woman?"

The older man pawed over three sheets of parchment before replying.

"Once a mere type-writer, then a shrewd Wall Street woman, and after that—something easier, with better pay," he said. "I thought you'd remember having seen her at the lobby in Washington."

Hakon did remember then. He knew, in a flashing back of memory, just what a subtle, unscrupulous, corrupting influence this woman lobbyist had been, and his indignation somewhat increased.

"Well," he added, "that doesn't tell me who she is."

"John, I don't know that it's any of your business," replied Graystone, imperturbably, "but her name is Bertha, and I guess you can see what she is to me."

Hakon felt too incensed to reply. To his earlier feeling of humiliation was added one of outrage. A glitter was in his eyes as he started to speak, but he was interrupted.

The door was opened by one of Graystone's many secretaries.

"The gentlemen are waiting in the board-room," he said.

"All right," said the chief, arising at once from his desk. "Don't let any one disturb us—not any one; understand? Come on, John. Some friends have called to see you."

"What do you mean?" demanded Hakon.

"You've been hostile enough for one afternoon," answered Graystone. "It was all right with Mrs. Meshe, but don't insult your forces. These are the men who have got to work to make you president."

In a great reactionary wave, the old political excitement suddenly arose and engulfed Hakon completely. That disappointed something in his mind which had grown with his expectation of meeting genuine "forces" here this morning was mollified

peculiarly. He followed Graystone from the room mechanically, his indignation of a moment before lending a certain fine dignity to his bearing.

A moment later he and Graystone entered a large, richly appointed apartment, furnished for the meetings of a board comprised entirely of millionaires, where eight men, all more or less ill at ease, were assembled and waiting.

The only one in all the company that Hakon recognized at once was Senn, the man who had thrust a disagreeable acquaintance upon him more than five years before. He was now a powerful, taciturn creature, more to be dreaded than before. To the others Graystone presented his protégé with offhand introductions. The last to be met was a senator, long before sent to Washington, and since retained there, by the moneyed powers, as Hakon thoroughly comprehended. Indeed, they two had been enemies, through principles, breeding, and natural tendencies, as both now distinctly remembered.

For the others, one was a bullet-headed sachem of a great political organization supposed to be inflexibly of the opposite party's complexion. He was an officer in Graystone's ranks, nevertheless, and a man of tremendous potency in national affairs. Two others were chairmen of central committees from States that might well blush for shame in delegating so vast an amount of their sovereign will to hands so loyal in their service to the syndicated kings.

The remaining three were equally powerful in States a little farther from the centre of government. One was from Hakon's old-time stamping-ground—one of the progeny of might who had grown gigantic since Hakon's brief, triumphant day.

With all of these Hakon shook hands. To all he

gave one quick, hard glance, as he threw down a mental gauntlet of defiance and told himself that he would make them all sting with defeat when at last they should thrust him into the White House.

He was eyed no less keenly by his "forces" than he was scrutinizing them. Two, at least, of the number had come there under pressure—a pressure too severe to be borne. They were sullen and moody, none the less because they knew they must serve this man to the last volt of energy remaining in their beings or plunge down the bottomless abyss of political oblivion forever afterwards. One of these was the senator whom Hakon had often lashed and beaten on the floor of the chamber at the national Capitol.

The greetings between these men and Hakon were conventional to stiffness. It was an awkward moment for all concerned—all save Graystone, the czar, despotic and omnipotent. It was he who bade them be seated at the long, carved-oak table where his board was wont to come to order. From his pocket he took a scrap of paper on which hardly more than a dozen words were scribbled. These represented the total epitomes of ten reports, from various centres of political industry, received this morning.

His keen intellect, still masterful in political intrigue and organization, from old-time practice and unremitted burnishing, singled out the errors and master-strokes in every reported action as readily as he might have assorted knives from hatchets. His instructions, sarcasms, and dictations, however, he reserved for a time more fitting.

"You fellows know what you are here for," he announced, after bidding Hakon to be seated beside

himself. "We have come to the top of the hill, where we can roll the nomination either way. There was no use in having you meet ex-Senator Hakon till then. The reports this morning are better than I had expected. Does any one know of any underground rumblings?"

"Yes, plenty of 'em," answered one of the sullen politicians who saw defeat of one of his own cherished schemes in Hakon's success, yet who dared not revolt for very fear of his own political existence. "The feeling for Brevoort is stronger than you think, and some of the leaders are growing suspicious of some of us, and the growl is getting loud all over my State."

"I'll look into that," said Graystone, coldly. "If I find that the Brevoort organization learns too much of what we are doing, there is going to be trouble. We are doing this quietly. I want everybody to understand that—quietly!" and he banged his fist on the table with a violent thump.

"Yes, but my constituency—" started the sullen lieutenant.

"Damn your constituency! I'm your constituency in this affair!" interrupted Graystone. "Now, then, no more jawing. We're a peaceful family party. We came here to ask a few questions of Senator Hakon. Get busy."

Evidently the affair had been carefully planned. It was the senator who had once been Hakon's prey, but who had never been slain by the powers, to whom was delegated the honor of acting as spokesman.

"Senator Hakon," he now said, "you once had quite a rash at Washington. I suppose that has since passed off entirely?"

Hakon knew what he meant. The interrogation

made him a trifle savage, despite the fact that his mind was over-excited by the confidence he felt that these men, and their allies, would absolutely make him president.

"Mr. Graystone isn't afraid of my company," he said. "Isn't that a guarantee sufficient?"

"Sufficient for Mr. Graystone—up to this time," answered the senator, calmly. "But there are several small items on which we would like to secure your word, as a man of honor."

The word "honor" from his lips sounded feeble and abashed to the sensitive ears of Hakon. But this was no time for parade of scorn.

"Well?" he said. "Go on."

"We wish to have you state, in this company of gentlemen," resumed the senator, "that if nominated at the next national convention as candidate for president of the United States, and elected to the the office in November, you will keep your hands off the money question, the national banks, and the tariff." He glanced around at his compatriots, adding to the company in general, "Was there anything more?"

"Yes, the inter-state commerce question and the vested rights and interests of corporations," answered the bullet-headed leader whose interests were half, at least, with the opposite political party. "He's to keep hands off from all the bunch."

"And the cabinet," said Senn, succinctly.

"Oh yes, the cabinet," echoed the senator. "You will also agree not to insist upon naming the cabinet, nor upon making any important appointments, without first consulting your friends. I think that was all." He looked at Graystone, who nodded affirmatively.

For a moment there was absolute silence. The utter shamelessness with which these creatures of might were requiring him to forswear any usefulness whatsoever, should he be elected president, was fairly appalling to Hakon's mind. He was speechless with amazement and something only comparable to patriotic indignation. Despair for his country, for himself—for all honor—almost paralyzed his faculties for the moment. To sacrifice his love for the truth so far as this—to give his solemn word as they required, only with the intention of breaking it utterly and serving the people with all his strength—this seemed too much to be done, even after all the long schooling in the scheme to which he had been subjected.

He was very white. He looked from one to the other of the faces in the room like a tiger brought to bay and obliged either to die or submit to captivity. It was the cruelty in the glances he met—the hard, conscienceless glitter in eyes grown accustomed to look on the sale of honor and all that manhood means—it was this look that goaded him to a final desperation. Yes! He would make them these promises. He would buckle on the yoke of submission with eager hands—all for the moment that would come at last with his election, when he could fling it off with one angry gesture, and hurl defiance in the startled ranks of all these soulless traitors! Let the whole wide world revile the method by which he would accomplish his ends, these Judases made his counter-scheming justifiable!

He had come there prepared to make concessions. He had not dreamed that he was intended to be but a paper president—that every atom of decency and power would be first extracted from the office.

He was more excited than he had ever been in all his life—and yet he appeared to be more cool than any one there in the room, save Graystone himself. He was dazzled by the prospect, not only because of the prominence to be at last vouchsafed him, but also by the vastness of the intrigue which he could not share with any one on earth—his own exalted intrigue against these financial and political monstrosities.

He took another and a calmer look at the faces about him.

"You are asking a very great deal," he said.

It was Graystone who answered.

"That's the price," he announced, in brutal candor. "If you wish to drop the game this morning, this is the time to say so. It's up to you. Are you going on?"

In that moment of intensity every ear was strained to catch the lightest tone of Hakon's voice. Absolute silence reigned in the room. Every eye was fixed on Hakon's face, so intensely white and cleanly chiselled. Some saw the sweat break out upon his forehead.

"Yes," he said, with deliberate distinctness, "I mean to go on."

"And you agree to accept the conditions?" interrogated the senator. "You will keep your hands off the questions and appointments mentioned?"

"Yes," said Hakon; but he added something more beneath his breath.

"That's your word of honor, Hakon, before all these gentlemen." said Graystone. "This meeting might as well adjourn."

A feeling of illness spread throughout Hakon's being. His word, heretofore, had been as sacred as

the very memories of his mother. Every moment of the hour he had passed beneath this roof paraded past his mental vision, abruptly, and anger and shame were impressed upon his being indelibly. An impulse to cry out "No!" with all his strength, an impulse to fling all the mess in the faces of these shameless creatures, possessed him for a second with a force almost beyond resistance. But he did not speak, and he had presently waved his hand to all the risen company in a purely mechanical way, and was ushered out of the place by Graystone himself.

In his own private office, Graystone took the cold, perspiring hand of his son-in-law prospective.

"You're all right, John. We've got the nomination nailed," he said. Opening a drawer he added: "Here are a few souvenirs from your friends. They like to keep friends friendly."

He removed a considerable package of crisp, official-looking sheets of parchment printed in varying colors. It was all stock — shares in sugar, steel, gas, leather, oil, and other industrials.

"The Lord loveth a cheerful giver," he said, with a grin, "and these givers are cheerful this morning."

Hakon took them, and with one violent wrench—which their toughness required—tore them straight across, then flung them on the floor. His reactionary anger had risen at this proffer which smacked so shamelessly of bribery.

"You have made a mistake," he said. "I'm going out to get some air."

Graystone laughed. "John, John," he said, reprovingly, "that was childish. But they'll stand in your name on the books. You look mad enough to throw up the whole proposition, but you'll get over it O. K. Good-bye. Come and see Clara this evening."

He let his visitor out at the door and closed the barrier quietly. Then presently he summoned Senn by means of a bell.

When his man came in, Graystone's face was a trifle harder than usual.

"Senn," he said, "how does the fight look to you? How many State delegations are in line?"

"Nearly all that have elected delegates. A lot of them who are shouting for Brevoort belong to us—except some in the West. Brevoort has a stubborn West behind him—till we get behind the West."

"I want you to get behind it with money, right away," dictated Graystone. "And when you get the time, I want you to rig up some stronger hold on Hakon. That old letter gag is getting weak; and he is hell for kicking over the traces. I want a brand new hold on him—understand?"

Senn replied he would do his best. His best was frequently very bad, indeed, for his victims.

He departed, and one by one the other members of the committee, which had come to meet John Hakon, were summoned to this the genuine throne-room to be flattered, oiled, or bulldozed into greater activity, as the case in hand might require. Graystone meant to have a president in his family, let the cost be what it might.

IX

BY the time he came to his office Hakon had run the whole gamut of passionate emotions, nearly all of which were jarring discordantly within him. A virtuous wrath was uppermost again in his being, accusing him, as well as the creatures with whom he had been closeted, and daring him to reassume the high self-respect which he had known in his former career. He was ashamed even of the patriotic treachery he had planned against the Graystone combination.

Every old-time habit of lofty thinking and noble purpose paraded through his mind like a ghost, pointing its ugly, bony finger at his present temptations and weaknesses in a species of condemnation. They could not die, these vital creatures of his former self; they could not even sleep in quietude. But over on the other side of his personality were modern clowns and tricksters of thought, who laughed and jeered at compunction, and urged him to go on with the work which they exalted. A ghost, however, is a thing which persists in existence after being slain. Moreover, it can never be slain again. In its filmy way it is quite imperishable. Hakon could not face those spectres of the past.

He sat down at his desk and wrote Amos Graystone a letter. When it was finished he read it over. In an angered, immoderate way it flung back all the

proffered "honors" and repudiated all the bargain. It was crude, so crude that Hakon himself could see its bald exaggerations. He therefore tore it up and wrote another, the purport unaltered, the language less inflammatory.

Upon rereading this second communication he was better pleased. He was likewise not a little mollified. Somewhat of his anger had been expended on the sheets of paper. Then he thought of how the thing would look when Graystone and the others—and perhaps Mrs. Meshe—should read it in convention. It would never do.

He destroyed it; and having been purged of his bitterest rancor and splenic poison, he penned a brief and more dignified note to meet the situation. The missive read:

> "Please consider the matter of our recent conversation entirely abandoned, so far as I am concerned. I am no longer a candidate for the presidency. I decline to accept an honor with dishonor. Respectfully yours,
>
> "JOHN ADAMS HAKON."

This he sealed in an envelope, which he addressed, stamped, and placed in his pocket. Then he paced the room more quietly, and felt relieved.

Reviewing the whole affair, as one might gaze upon a prison from which escape has just been effected, he took a deep breath of satisfaction, particularly when his mind swung its light on the figure of Graystone's daughter. He thought nothing harsh; he even experienced a momentary sympathy for Miss Graystone, who was less a daughter than an instrument, a chattel, a means of personal gratification to her father in his latest ambition.

Having thought of her, Hakon's memory sped in-

stantly to Ruth Sherwood—who had asked him to visit her home this afternoon. A pang of mingled disappointment and chagrin attacked him acutely as he realized the sacrifice it would mean to his nature to tell her he was no longer to be thought of as a candidate for president. She had spoken repeatedly upon the subject the previous evening, and with obvious pride in his achievement of even so much as his present distinction. For a moment his hand went to his pocket where lay the letter to Graystone. He could still tear it up—and, after all, to be president—

The ghosts resumed their solemn procession through his brain.

No! The letter must remain intact. He must send it before temptation overmastered all. He would go and see Miss Sherwood, and post the letter on the way—or, at latest, after he had seen her and partially broken the news.

From marching up and down the apartment he came to rest in his chair. There was something quieting, something compensating, in a deliberate contemplation of Ruth Sherwood's singularly attractive entity. He was amazed and pleased at the rapidity with which he and she had become acquainted. She must be a very extraordinary woman, he thought, so to affect his existence—his physical, his mental, or was it his spiritual, being—or all the three combined? It was all a phenomenon, puzzling, fascinating, inexplicable. Here was wine warmly stealing through his veins again; here were foreign elements coalescing with his very identity. He did not know himself in such a mood; nor could he comprehend the reason for this change, so like an alchemy going on, apparently, beneath his very

eyes and within his very self, and yet a mystery inscrutable.

He shook his head; it was quite beyond his ken. But he took out his watch and consulted it eagerly. It was nearly two o'clock. If he walked to the Hobarts', where Miss Sherwood had her home, he would arrive there at a reasonable hour.

Without a lunch, or a thought of lunch, he left the office, strode out into busy Fifth Avenue, and, presently passing Twenty-third Street and Madison Square, continued up the thoroughfare with never a memory of the letter reposing in his pocket.

The avenue was thronged with automobiles and carriages, for the day was fine. On the sidewalks wealth and fashion flowed in either direction, much of it tugged at impatiently by pampered dogs in costly blankets and harness.

Past art-stores, galleries, great hotels, and shops of antiquities, past clubs and then palatial dwellings, past the cathedral—majestic even in its mundane company of brown-stone buildings—and finally past the entrance to Central Park at Fifty-ninth Street, with its gilded Sherman equestrian group—at once a tribute to a soldier and a symbol of millionaire vulgarity—past all of these, Hakon continued before at last he entered the home of the Hobarts.

It was a modest home, for Hobart had barely half a million. A servant ushered Hakon deferentially into a drawing-room in which magnificence could find itself at ease and luxury would find content. A number of the pictures that Hakon beheld on the walls were ancient and honorable, but poor.

Miss Sherwood entered the room almost at once. She came towards him gladly—a vision of womanhood, dignified, beautiful, sparkling with pleasure

and animation. She took Hakon's hand with both her own and shook it warmly.

"I almost knew the moment you would come," she said. Then she laughed. "How funny that must sound," she added. "Let's sit down over here by the window. Tell me, do I seem to you very peculiar?"

"Well, you affect me peculiarly," confessed her visitor, and he looked at her closely, intently, from beneath his heavy brows. "I like it," he hastened to assure her, "but—I don't believe I understand it. What do you think yourself?"

She was coloring warmly. Her eyes were half mischievous then wholly sincere. He thought he had never seen eyes so richly brown nor hair of such matchless mahogany.

"Why, I only feel as if we had been acquainted a long time," she answered. "You know that sometimes happens."

"That, perhaps, affords an explanation," he agreed. "It may be owing to the fact that I knew your mother—"

"And that she knew you," supplemented Ruth. She did not add that her mother had thought of him, long and deeply, before she, Ruth, was born. One advantage she had over Hakon—she knew why fluttered her heart in his presence and all that it meant to be so impatient to see him and to keep him long in sight.

She sought refuge in another subject. "Tell me all the things you can think of about your presidential hopes," she said. "That is, if you feel like talking them over with a woman."

She watched to see the look of intensity return to his face—the look she had seen the night before—the marks of ambition's sculpturing.

The tense expression came to his eyes and mouth readily, as if, indeed, at command of a conjurer; and seeing what a hardened, almost savage, light it was that was struck in his deep-set eyes, she was startled. At the play it had seemed less — something, and more triumphant.

"Are you very ambitious?" he asked her, with deft evasion.

"I think I am," she confessed, and her hands, abruptly clinched together, were eloquent of more than her spoken admission. She added, impulsively: "I don't know why, but I am very ambitious for you! I am eager to see you do great things. It's mother's fault—some of it, anyway."

He looked her straight in the eyes. Despite herself she answered his gaze with a brief repetition of that wonderful glance of the previous evening. And again his brain experienced bewilderment and glimpses of things and realms unknown to his ken. Then the change came to pass, and his baffled senses fell back upon themselves and left him strangely in the dark—for her look was once more normal.

He mastered himself with difficulty, and by making an effort remembered what it was she had said but a moment before.

"Ambition has been my one purpose in life," he said, looking out on the street from the window. "I can see that it might be a madness. . . ." He was silent for a minute, then inquired: "Miss Sherwood, if a man discovers that ambition has become a madness, what should he do?'

"He ought first to be certain that it is a madness, and not a fancy wrought by an overworked nervous condition," she answered, sagely, amazed at herself and her calmness. "How could it become a madness?"

He was tempted to tell her everything. He had never had a similar impulse in his life. What a relief a torrent of confession would have been to the man is almost inconceivable. His habit, however, crushed the folly without delay.

"I don't know," he said, suddenly, afraid of revealing too much and yet very much desiring help or consolation or advice. "I suppose a man could go to lengths that you might define as madness in a great, inordinate desire to achieve distinction."

"A woman could, I know," she answered. "And she probably would. When a woman is ambitious—But what's the use? We can only be ambitious for others. I should like to know, though, about the sort of madness. Some madnesses, or frenzies, you know, are sublime."

"When they call for sacrifice?" he demanded.

She noted his excitement. She liked it. She felt it was something he shared with herself that he might not, perhaps, care to share with every new-made friend.

"Surely sacrifices are heroic," she answered. "It takes courage to make a sacrifice."

He felt that she misunderstood him, that she might read a nobility into his meaning that he was beginning to fear was not present. And the more she exalted his position the more difficult became the possibility of demeaning himself.

"I might not, possibly, mean self-sacrifice—altogether," he admitted. "What then?"

"Why—then," she faltered, "why, how can I tell? To subserve some high resolve it might be necessary and right to sacrifice others."

"But what about doing violence to—" he checked himself at the word "honor." He could not say it.

Her penetrative intelligence might fathom so deeply into his wretched secrets. He could not even consent to say "principles," and therefore he confined himself to the word "traditions."

"Violence to traditions?" she repeated. "Perhaps I know what you mean. Mr. Breeme told Mr. Hobart that he was tempted to 'join the bandits,' as he called it—politically, of course—in order the better to learn their ways and defeat their purposes. If that is what you mean, why, I should say he would be justified. But I am very ambitious, as I said; my judgment may not be sound."

Hakon was glad of a refuge. He availed himself at once of Breeme's position, not only because it was analogous to his own, but likewise because Breeme afforded him a hypothetical case. It was also a great relief to his mind to find Ruth arguing precisely as he had done, till now, himself.

"Yes, Breeme said something of the sort to me," he said. "But suppose he found himself obliged to make certain promises before he could get the support of the necessary powers, would he still be justified?"

She laughed. "Why, I'm sure I don't know. I'd rather not sound too peculiar in my views—especially about such a trifling thing as Mr. Breeme's going to the State legislature. But if he were fighting his way to the presidency!— Well!—oh, I'd want him to win. I'd want him to fight everything and everybody that stood in the path. I should wish to help. And if I liked him— Well, you see how excited and—unguarded—I can become. And I hardly know why."

She did know why, and her heart was exulting in the knowledge. It had come upon her suddenly,

the evening before—in the box—and before she had even heard him speak, or known who he was, or that politics and great ambition had marked him with signs so distinctive.

Hakon was singularly aroused. The language that his nature spoke, in response to her outburst, was a strange tongue to his understanding; he comprehended not a word of it, even now; but he knew it was something tremendous, something that awed and overwhelmed him, reason and poise and all, and that gladness reigned above his mental chaos.

"You were born for a Spartan," he said, his rare, faint smile illuminating his face. "Those women must have been more than just merely wives to their men; they must have been comrades, helpful and wise and brave."

"I'd rather be an American," she answered, with a pure feminine grace, exceptionally charming. "I prefer this age. I feel sure this is one of the greatest hours, in the greatest republic that the world has ever known. But I'm glad of what you said."

Hakon knew of nothing further to add. She had driven thoughts of Graystone, with all that Graystone meant, quite away from his mind. He felt he would be content to sit here for a very long time and look at Ruth Sherwood.

He presently said: "And how is Mrs. Hobart?"

"Quite happy," answered Ruth. "She has gone out this afternoon. Oh, I nearly forgot—shall I serve you tea?"

"I don't know," said Hakon, slowly. "I don't care much, I'm afraid, for social amenities."

"Neither do I," said Ruth. "I hate them, ordinarily. But perhaps it might be enjoyable this afternoon. I'm going to do it."

She was well aware of the charm that sometimes steeps with the aromatic leaves from the East. She rang the bell and gave her order with a subtle sense of excitement.

Presiding at the tiny table a few minutes later, she presented a picture such as Hakon had never before observed. There was something intimate about it, something that opened a vista of homely delights on which he had never bent his insight before. He had never known tea to intoxicate the senses as it did to-day. And still he was ignorant of his plight.

They talked of the play, of the recent books, of a dozen topics that string themselves together hit-or-miss.

When he rose to go, Hakon had forgotten to think of Ruth's mother as affording a possible explanation for his state of mind and being. His nature was gratified when Ruth asked him frankly if they might not soon meet again.

"I want to hear all that you feel you can tell me about your fight," she said. "I do so want you to be president."

As he walked along the street again he took from his pocket the letter he had written to Graystone. He tore it up into pieces no larger than a dime, and scattered them all along the curb.

X

IT was not until after his dinner, when the man began to feel unaccountably lonesome and hungry for something domestic to do with his time, that Hakon suddenly realized what Ruth Sherwood had done. She had newly ignited ambition; she had outweighed his scruples; she had made retreat ignoble and his letter of refusal impossible. And in doing all this she had reconsigned him to the mercies of Graystone—and Clara.

A certain grimness in the irony of all the situation awoke in the man an admiration of the Fates. At the same time his nature underwent revolt at the thought of Graystone's daughter. Having momentarily freed himself from the matrimonial predicament forced upon him by Graystone, he was loath, indeed, to return to it now and once more deliver himself, body and soul, a captive.

He had utterly forgotten Graystone's invitation to visit their home in the evening. Now he remembered it much too vividly. He likewise remembered the man's remark: "You look mad enough to throw up the whole proposition, but you'll get over it O. K." That Graystone should have known him so well, known his weakness and counted upon it, filled him with bitterness and self-discredit. But Graystone should one day pay for it all. Ruth could not be the only one who would count his method justifiable.

He knew he must visit Clara Graystone this evening, howsoever much he loathed himself for consenting to the plan. The something in his nature which had yearned for domesticity shrank from the ordeal before him. There could be nothing domestic, either now or in the future, in this alliance—this offspring of expedience and politics.

How he should deport himself in the presence of Clara Graystone, in the light of their new, semi-understood relationship, Hakon did not attempt to conjecture. He had seen her last three days before, at which time their acquaintance had been scarcely less formal than on the afternoon of the ride in his car. That they would ever be acquainted thoroughly, or comfortably, he could not believe. The whole business sickened him. Nevertheless, for every new attack of disgust—at himself and the game he was playing — there came a swift and exciting reaction as his underlying cogitations re-depicted Ruth Sherwood in his mind, her brown eyes gloriously ablaze while she fearlessly declared her hopes for his ultimate political success.

Goaded one moment and elated the next, the man felt the very streets of the city too confining. He hailed a cab as he walked Broadway, in the brilliant region of the theatres, and ordered the driver to take him to his automobile garage. There he ran out his car and, threading his way in and out of the traffic of avenues and streets, went swiftly through Longacre, out on Broadway, past the circle with its graceful monument to Columbus, and finally across the town to Riverside Drive.

Not a ripple of wind disturbed the calm, deliberate tide of the Hudson. Mirrored on its mile width of level mystery, a thousand lights along the Jersey

shore blazed gorgeously. The sheer beauty of the scene gave Hakon a thrill of pleasure which a thousand times, and always vainly, he had tried to express to himself. And there were miles of this majestic river, and miles of the lights upon the farther side. Out in the stream a tug-boat, with a huge, dark mass of barges in tow, was puffing rhythmically as it strained at its task of forging up the stream.

The automobile was running quietly, its purring a comfort and a solace to the man in control. He presently beheld the Soldiers' and Sailors' monument, a graceful, gray tower of beauty in its environment of trees; and then it was passed. After that the man became oblivious of the panorama. He gave himself over to companionship with the car, for it brought him calm; it re-established his self-control; it took his thoughts to itself and kept them busy.

He rode for fully fifteen miles out through the ever-reasserted city, and finally into country roads, dark, unknown, and diverting. When at length he returned, and delivered up the big hot machine, he was more like himself. He again hailed a cab and was driven to Graystone's residence, where Clara was waiting eagerly to hear him come.

Graystone knew enough, at a time like this, not to obtrude himself upon the scene. A servant conducted Hakon to Clara's own small drawing-room, where he had not long to wait alone.

Clara came in with a sprightliness of manner and a coyness and coquetry amply advertised by her blushes of pleasure. She was dressed superbly, in some wonderful creation of lace and ribbons, yet redolent of Parisian conjuring. It was modestly

cut away at the neck, and the marvels of sleeves, diaphanous and soft, made even the thin arms within them almost beautiful.

But some change, less discernible, yet patent enough, apparently, had undoubtedly been wrought in Miss Graystone's appearance, apart from the gown. As she came towards him, Hakon realized it concerned her hair, now a rich, dark brown—no longer streaked with gray. It had undergone a change to suit the occasion. Hakon knew this quickly, and was not uncontainably pleased.

The smile on Clara's face, however, was genuine. She was honestly happy—flattered and gratified. She had dreamed of this meeting, after what her father had imparted of Hakon's intentions. A woman could live on romance where a man would starve, and Miss Graystone had hungered for long.

She approached him awkwardly, desiring to appear maidenly reluctant, yet eager to show him the completeness of his triumph over her heart. She smiled and beamed all the way from the door to where he stood, for he made no forward movement to give her greeting. It embarrassed him, made him wish she would do things differently. It looked to him like affectation; and the whole affair was a bald, unlovely transaction of business.

"John," she said, tremulously, "how good of you to come. I am so happy." To her the engagement was already very real indeed.

He frowned at her use of his given name. She had halted, a pace from where he waited. She now dropped her eyes, and, edging closer, appeared to be waiting for something to happen. Hakon, who thought of nothing extraordinary that the moment demanded, wondered what her attitude could mean—

what freak of femininity it might be that prompted this demeanor.

"This was—a—pleasant evening for a visit," he forced himself to say, though his utterance came stubbornly.

"Oh yes," she agreed. She touched his arm and urged him gently towards a settee barely large enough for one person and a child. "Won't you sit down?"

He sat down, helplessly, his hands on his knees, as she occupied the space beside him, straining the delicate arm of the pretty bit of furniture. They were silent for a moment. Hakon had nothing to say, and could think of nothing appropriate to the moment until he remembered the letter she had sent.

"I got your note," he then observed. "You were very kind to write."

"Thank you, John," she murmured. "I— My heart was so full I just had to let you know. Besides, if you were wondering how I— I mean, suspense is sometimes awful, isn't it?"

He said: "I don't know. Yes, I believe it is," but he could think of no particular suspense she might have in mind. Had she spoken of uneasiness, his nature must have responded with an answering chord at once.

"I wrote to you yesterday evening, right after my long, happy conversation with papa," added Clara. "I didn't know how I could wait so long to see you again—after all that papa told me."

Hakon glanced at her quickly, instantly suspicious that Graystone had led her to believe far more than he himself had intended to permit her to expect at this particular time. The shyness of her answering look, together with other evidences of maidenly con-

sciousness, left him no room to doubt that her father had placed no limitations whatsoever on her hopes.

The man was angered, for he had never intended until the last moment arrived to ask Miss Graystone to be his wife; yet there was nothing he could do or say to her now to contradict what her father might have imparted. He saw that Graystone had tricked him and left him completely disarmed.

"These are very busy days for your father and for me," he said, determined that she should not be led to expect to see him often. "I shall hardly know when to call an hour my own."

"Oh," said Clara, in a tone of disappointment. "But perhaps you'll often have to come to see papa —and it's such a little way from the study to—to here. And these are such lovely days for riding—automobiling."

"Yes, very agreeable weather," answered Hakon. "Too bad I shall be so occupied."

They were silent again. Clara sighed deeply, but happily. She presently placed her two hands very near to Hakon's fist and spread out her fingers peculiarly.

"I haven't a jewel on my fingers—not one," she told him, playfully. "See?"

Looking at her fingers, Hakon answered:

"I see. Very good taste."

"Do you like them better—that way?" she inquired, coyly suggesting certain pretty usages to which a ring might be put.

"Yes," said Hakon, "I think I do." He was growing more and more displeased with the trend of the whole affair. The thing he had most wished to avoid was taking place, and he was powerless to prevent it without assuming a brutality wholly in-

compatible with his nature. He could have cursed Graystone, and he was somewhat disgusted by his daughter.

"Not even—one little ring—on the hand that is nearest to my heart?" she inquired, blushing for her boldness, and laughing nervously. "Not even a friendship ring?"

Hakon had no intention of being led into further compromises.

"No," he answered, coldly. "I care very little for jewelry on any woman's hand."

Clara was baffled, but she was not without her resources.

"Then I sha'n't wear any—no matter who might give me one," she said, in a softened utterance meant to be caressing. She sighed, adding: "Your opinion means more to me than any one's in all the world."

"You are very kind," said Hakon, who could not meet her advances with absolute severity, wish what he might. He had one refuge left, however—his watch.

He took it from his pocket abruptly. The time was half-past nine.

"I shall have to be going—business engagement," he said. "I have spent a—very pleasant time."

As he rose she stood up beside him.

"Oh, I'm sorry you must hurry," she said. "Papa said he wanted to see you for a moment before you went."

"I'll see him at once," said Hakon, moving to depart.

"Oh—John," said Miss Graystone, in a murmur just louder than a whisper, "you—" and she halted, coy again and blushing.

"Yes?" he said, shortly, annoyed as before at her use of his name.

"You know—now—" and she hesitated, still coquettishly, and coming closer raised her face. "I'm going to let you—"

The blood rushed to Hakon's face. He had never kissed a woman in such a way as this in his life; his being revolted at what it conceived to be a sacrilege. He stood there unmoving, and Clara slowly permitted her cheek to descend till it lightly swept his lips.

In that second something tremendous happened in his mind. He suddenly knew that he loved Ruth Sherwood—that his nature had recognized and demanded its mate—that his hunger for domestic things was hunger for Ruth and her kindred ways—that his lips and his hands were laden with what they longed to bestow on no one in all the world but Ruth—that he wanted to kiss her, take her in his arms, and drink from that wonderful look in her eyes.

The truth burst upon him like a suddenly created light, too intense to be borne. He was blinded by its glare; he was helpless while the dazzling radiance engulfed him. He was groping in his momentary dizziness.

When he could see, it was Clara's face before his eyes. He looked at her strangely, in a rising anger—as if she had robbed him—robbed him of something precious beyond all price. He hated her despite his utmost efforts at control.

Intense as his feeling was, in that moment of revelation, the man had still a strength to meet the occasion. It was all his reserve that he called into requisition; it totalled more than he had ever demanded from his government of self, and it served him splendidly.

To Clara the man seemed calm enough.

"Good-night," he said. "Your father, I suppose, is in the study."

Clara was softly repeating, for the third time, "Good-night, John," when he strode from the room.

A moment later he found himself confronting Graystone in the study.

"Oh, there was nothing in particular to say, John," said the cold-eyed meddler with destinies. "I merely thought I'd—here, have a cigar? No?—that I'd ask you, when you came out, if you've thought of setting a day for the wedding?"

"No," said Hakon, suppressing his anger as best he might. "No such wedding could possibly take place till next November at the earliest."

Graystone observed the mood his man was in, but attributed the slight display of temper to the causes of the morning. Hakon was still a little sore.

"November?" he repeated. "Why not immediately after the national convention?"

Hakon was in a mood that would suffer little pressure.

"Because," he said, "if I made such an alliance with your family before election, the opposition would stand an excellent show of winning the fight."

"Your brain is still pretty clear and your tongue hasn't had all its sting pulled, even yet," commented Graystone, pleased by Hakon's wisdom no less than he was by the man's keen summary of facts. "We'll fix it for just before Thanksgiving day, my boy. There is nothing like having a little something to be really thankful for."

"I agree with you heartily," said Hakon, his lip slightly curled with the sarcasm. "Good-night."

"Good-night, John. Come again soon," said

Graystone, and after a minute of pondering Hakon's final remark, he puffed caressingly at his slowly wasting cigar. "People do like to throw snowballs," he mused, "and sometimes they will put a rock inside."

XI

HAKON was trying to work on the following morning. His office was high from the street, in a prominent building on Fifth Avenue, with windows that overlooked a vast, ugly field of roof-tops, relieved at intervals by flag-poles, tall and slender.

The man's labor was a literary task that bid fair to outlast his days of usefulness. He had assumed it as affording him both a refuge and an employment after he had first abandoned the practice of law, and then had found himself a worsted politician with his occupation gone. He was writing a species of history and political science combined, relating to ancient peoples—lake-builders, cave-tribes, and cliff-dwellers, into whose modes of life and government he had delved with great application. In addition to the work already in hand, he was preparing notes for an *Evolution of Politics*, a *Political Jurisprudence*, a *History of Self-Government*, and an elaborate commentary on *The Insistence of Liberty*.

He had come here this morning in the hope that his work would divert his thoughts from the turmoil in which he had tossed in sleeplessness throughout the night. But notes, manuscripts, outlines—nothing had a power to hold him. He had seen himself revealed; he had realized what his feeling towards Ruth Sherwood signified, and conflicting emotions possessed him wholly. He was wrapped in anger

in one moment; he was suffused with a painful sort of ecstasy the next. Every thought of Graystone and his daughter brought resentment, just as every memory of Ruth bore in its train intoxication, excitement, and despair.

In his new frame of mind he could readily have forgiven Graystone everything but this matrimonial arrangement. All the shames and humiliations imposed upon him as conditions precedent to his possible candidacy, he could now accept with some show of equanimity—but Clara Graystone! The thought made him haul at his collar for breath. He had never liked Graystone before; he hated him now.

The vista wherein he beheld Ruth Sherwood had opened only to tantalize his soul—and closed again. That wonderful look between her eyes and his had been but fate's abrupt prelude to a tragedy of love ground to helplessness by Graystone's heel.

Love that was passionate, spiritually, mentally, and physically, had come upon Hakon with a force the greater, the more irresistible, because of his former immunity. All his faculties for such a love were intact, as well as matured. His nature, heretofore schooled in intensity, that chance had diverted into ways of political ambitions, was aflame without warning, as the sun is aflame—for all eternity.

He would close his eyes to this presidential *ignis fatuus* that was leading him far into swamps of mire and death; he would utterly repudiate it all. But Ruth! Ruth wished it—wished him to go on, urged it—loved it. If he turned away, if he came to her empty-handed—what could he tell her, by way of explanation?—what that would not be revolting? And what would she answer? And what of the love that he might, as a presidential candidate,

request of her—woo from her—demand, in answer to his passion? She would feel no love. She was strangely ambitious, singularly engrossed in politics. She wished him to be president.

To abandon his prospects would, he felt convinced, be to surrender all possible chance of winning love from Ruth. To proceed, to fulfil conditions—Graystone's conditions—and pluck the rotten fruit of such a presidency as Graystone offered, would be to open a chasm wholly impassable between himself and Ruth the moment his marriage with Clara should be consummated. Baffled in either direction, tortured by the very thoughts that set him all aglow, the man felt that madness might fittingly descend upon him.

In despair of calm thinking, he sat once more at his desk, endeavoring to concentrate his mind upon the work wherein, heretofore, he had found both solace and pleasure. It was all of no use. He was reading his own annotations half a dozen times over without comprehending a word. Doggedly he labored with himself. He struck his fist upon his forehead, as if to awaken oversleeping faculties; but the faculties within, half intoxicated, half agonized, could not be compelled to attention.

As he rose again to pace the room a knock on the door interrupted his meditations.

"Come in," he said, pausing and facing about. "Come in."

His visitor was Breeme, who entered like a breeze of the spring itself.

"Hello, Hakon," he said. "At work? Say, I've just met a friend of mine, a reporter, who's a wonderful chap. His name is Roberts. One of the smartest men I ever met. I want you to meet him. I came

500430

right up to see you to tell you all about him. Say! He knows more about corruption, illegal combinations of capital, bribery, and jobbery than any man living; and I can corral him for you."

"Take a breath," said Hakon. "Sit down. How are you, anyway?"

"Me? Fine! But I want to tell you about Roberts," insisted Breeme, with edifying enthusiasm. "I've told him who you are, but not that you're in town. I didn't admit that you are sort of hiding from the press. He remembers the stir you made at Washington. He says he'll load you up with political dynamite—give you facts and proofs that will tear off the roofs and throw down the walls of fortified wrong, and expose the swarm of thieves and financial cutthroats to a glare that will make them wither with fright. He's got the facts! He's—"

"I wonder he hasn't printed them—made a sensation himself," interrupted Hakon. "Newspapers gloat over anything yellow, especially in pseudo-morality."

"That's just it—pseudo-morality," echoed Breeme, excitedly. "They don't want concrete facts—they prefer these lime-light generalities. They've said a great deal and used a lot of information already, but some of his facts Roberts wouldn't dare to use in print. Say, he's got telegrams that would send half a dozen senators and two big political bosses to the penitentiary for life. He stole them. They're not copies, either; they're the originals—on private telegraphing blanks, and he'll turn them over to you in a minute. He says you're the man to wield them."

"Well, you are both very complimentary," said Hakon, diverting his gaze from that nervous, alternating-current look in Breeme's busy eyes. "You

know it is easy to ruin everything by being too precipitate. I'm not yet precisely in a position—"

"Of course not—not yet," interrupted Breeme. "That's what Roberts said himself. You've got to go slow till you're sure of your ground."

Hakon's eyes were burning. The weapons that were offered to his hand he dared not touch, at present. Nevertheless, the reputation he had made as a champion of honesty and decency should yet take on a greater lustre—unless his means of striving to defeat corruption and dishonesty should be wholly misunderstood.

"There are many stories of corporation tyranny in the land," he said. "And they are all outrageous."

"Roberts knows them," said Breeme. "He'll tell you how the coal barons, during the New York winter famine, had millions of tons of coal hoarded up all the time, and how they worked a great fear of defeat on a certain president by threatening that Pennsylvania would go Democratic, and actually made a bargain with the government so artfully that it looked all right, whereby the rebate system and the interstate commerce business were all permitted to be managed and dictated by themselves."

The old fever was rising in Hakon's veins; his deep-set eyes were gleaming with Promethean fire. His breath was coming fast.

"Breeme," he said, "those are weighty accusations."

"Weighty?" responded Breeme. "What did I say? Oh, Roberts will give you Gatling guns loaded to the muzzle with deadly facts. Talk about chain-shot that mows a swath through everything! He'll tell you some inside facts about gas here in New York City. He'll tell you about the big insur-

ance companies, with three hundred million dollars of mobile capital, *daily*, to use, with the banks and in great big deals, to sway the market, push through special legislation, elect needed men, and to run us—run the whole kit and boodle of us, all the time! He'll tell you about a man named Graystone. Say! He's the crafty old Cæsar—and crisp as a lawyer in hell!"

"Graystone?" echoed Hakon, turning abruptly to look from the window. "Graystone? Do you know him?"

"No!" ejaculated Breeme. "A small fry like me never gets near enough to see him. Roberts has only seen him once. He's IT. And no man ever yet fought him and lived to be glad."

Hakon would have welcomed the thought of having a partner in his hopes and schemes. Although he did not dare reveal his game to this friend, nevertheless he wished very much to sound his views.

"Breeme," he said, "you are young and enthusiastic. Why don't you inaugurate a big crusade yourself?"

"Me?" said Breeme. A peculiar smile played on his thin lips; a light of humor sparkled in his eyes. "Say, old man," he added, in a slower and less optimistic tone of voice, "the fact is— But I nearly forgot to tell you something more. I'll tell you this before I forget it. We think we've got one of the smaller devil-fish tangled in the seine, and Roberts says the fellow will squeal on the big ones soon, if something doesn't happen."

"Some of your figures of speech defy me," Hakon told him. "But I suppose—"

"I'll tell you," interrupted Breeme. "One of their tools was arrested for bribery way back last

year. They balked every effort to get him to trial till a month ago. He openly boasted he would never be tried. But the case came up in spite of all they could do—for they didn't dare come to his aid while some of the papers were pouring in daylight, night and morning; and the jury has found him guilty, and it looks as if he'll get the limit, for the judge is as hot as the Fourth of July. The fellow's name is Charley Oluff. He's a smooth worker and a valuable man, but he knows his business, and if it's squealing or patient suffering that will pay him best, he'll do one or the other rather promptly. Once in a while the gang has to let somebody take the medicine, to keep up appearances. You wait for a few days and see."

Hakon said: "You were starting to tell me something about yourself. Why is it you don't care to start a crusade against these iniquities on your own account?"

"Well," said Breeme, lowering his eyes and beginning to draw squares and diamonds on Hakon's blotter with a pencil, "I'm going to do it, but—all in a way of my own. I came in to tell you about it—partly. . . . You see, a man can't do anything by standing on a house-top somewhere and spitting fire. Some one would simply ring in an alarm and put him out. You've got to be smarter than that."

"Yes. I suppose you have," Hakon agreed. "And how are you going to do it?"

"Well, I want you to approve of the plan, if you can," Breeme confessed. "The fact is, old man, it will look as if I've gone over to the enemy. At least I can get elected if I join the gang; and that's what I can't be—again—in any other way. Then, when I'm on the inside, I can watch their methods, learn

about their sources of graft, to play the game as they play it, and some day eat them up from the inside."

Hakon said, "Oh."

Breeme felt he was failing to make out a case. He hastened on, with further justifications:

"You know I'm just a germ—a political microbe—hunting around on the outside for a job," he continued. "Now, I maintain that a germ, to do any business, has got to get on the inside. Do you see the point? I join the enemy, play up to the part, and some day begin, as I said, to destroy their reeking carcasses."

"Turn traitor," said Hakon, who was glad to accuse a fellow-being as a relief from accusing himself. "That is what you mean, in plain English?"

"What can you do?" demanded Breeme. "Until a man becomes powerful, he's got to adopt the methods surest to win. And isn't it fair to fight these knaves and scoundrels with their own devices—to give such a gang the double-cross—same as they give it to the people? Honestly, now, would you blame me?"

Hakon waited for a moment before replying. He was tremendously glad thus to hear his own scheme and position defended.

"No, Breeme," he said, "honestly, I couldn't."

"Thanks, old fellow," exclaimed poor Breeme, a little overcome with emotion. "Shake. I'd hate to forfeit your respect and good opinion. I'm really going to try to keep up the fight for better things."

Hakon shook his hand heartily.

"How will you manage to be elected?" he inquired. "What will you ask for of your new political friends?"

"Oh, I think I'll go back to Albany," said Breeme. "There's a good deal to learn up there. And it's easy to go. Roberts was telling me how they manage it here in New York. A young fellow, good spell-binder and all that, either Democrat or Republican, shouting for reform, soon attracts the attention of the ward heelers and political cruisers looking for promising material. Some very persuasive talker is sent to see him. He tells him he is a fine campaign orator—sure to make his mark—and asks him to meet some leader, higher up, as the leader wishes to make his acquaintance. Well, he's flattered — all young politicians are easily flattered—and he goes. The leader assures him he ought to go to Albany, invites him to make a lot of speeches in the ward, and arranges to give him a chance in half a dozen places. See?"

"I see it so far. Go on."

"He makes the speeches. And every time he holds forth a number of men, paid to do the work, immediately throng up and give him the glad hand—tell him what an impression he's making—silver-tongued orator, and all that molasses and dope. They say he owes it to his country to go to Albany. He says he can't afford to run. Oh, well, they'll fix all that. They advance him a couple of hundred dollars—and they don't care what he does with it. He can put it in his pocket, or he can spend it. They'll ask no questions. Then they boost him on every day, and work him up to a great excitement about his powers and the urgent call of his constituency, who can only be truly served when he lands in Albany."

"And do they really intend to put him there?" inquired Hakon, who felt he had been in the woods with his literary work.

"Sure," answered Breeme. "After they get him worked up pretty thoroughly, and the money they've advanced is gone, and he's nicely under obligations, and in debt to the organization, the leader sends for him and says: 'My boy, you are destined for a great career. How do you feel about this gas franchise question?' The young fellow throws out his chest and denounces the steal heroically. 'I'm against it, first, last, and all the time!' he says. 'Now that's too bad,' says the leader. 'I've got a little stock in that myself, and I'd hate to see such a public benefaction hampered or crippled. Here, I'd like to give you a little block of this stock, and when you know more about it, I'm sure you'll feel different.' He gives him the stock. There are millions of shares of gas stock printed for this purpose and floating about this city all the time."

"Real stock?" said Hakon, remembering Graystone's offer of a gift to himself.

"Real stock," Breeme assured him. "The young orator takes it. 'Now, then,' says the leader, 'when you want to know anything about gas, or how to vote on any question concerning gas, you come to me. And when you get to Albany keep off the gas. Give the people parks. You can talk all you please about parks. Give them a herd of parks—great public breathing-places—lovely, poetic fields of verdure and trees! A park is a heritage of health, joy, and patriotism for the children. Give them parks—and come and see me about the gas.' Well, the young orator goes up to Albany, where he finds himself one of a small army of similar young politicians, all of them silver-tongued orators, all eager for parks, all taking tips on how to vote the gas business from the leader who promoted their election. Now,

I ask you, what can one little honest microbe do in such society as that? And gas is only one small branch of political chicanery."

Hakon replied with a question. "Have you got any gas stock now?"

"Not yet," said Breeme, with a wonderful grin; "but I've got some good hot air."

XII

THE work laid out on Hakon's desk was neglected, hour after hour, even when Breeme had finally gone; for all that his visitor had imparted was undergoing review and expansion in Hakon's mind, and he paced up and down the floor unrestingly.

Justifications are sophistries, almost invariably. Aware of this as he was, however, Hakon nevertheless gave welcome to any argument by which he could help to justify his position to his own conscience. He was quite convinced that Breeme was warranted — that he had a right to combat the organized thieves by appearing to join with their forces, only to turn traitor later and rend them with the added power thus acquired; and, therefore, he was equally certain his own devices were commendable.

In a feverish manner Hakon was telling himself that when once elected president he would be loudly applauded for defying the powers which had placed him in the White House, and for repudiating the shameless promises exacted from him as the price of their support. They, like Breeme's "gang," were "giving the people the double-cross." Why should they expect anything less themselves? Then he thought of that moment in which he had given his solemn word to Graystone and the others respecting what he would do if elected. He wondered what

Ruth Sherwood would think should she ever know the all he was doing.

Had Ruth, instead of Breeme, suggested these justifiable treacheries, how happy he could be. But he felt that she would loathe them, and so despise himself for giving them even a moment of harborage. Yet she had almost sanctioned the matter when he had half-way presented a hypothetical case.

When he thought of going to her immediately, in order—as he told himself—to sound her views still further on such a justification, he took no time for anything but to snatch his hat. His work was left in disorder on his desk; his house keys and penknife, employed as paper-weights, were forgotten.

In a cab he was driven to the Hobarts' place. In the act of alighting he beheld Miss Sherwood emerging from the door, dressed in a close-fitting riding-habit, one gloved hand holding the folds of her draperies, the other loosely closed on a crop. A man with her horse was standing at the curb.

"Why—why, it's you, Mr. Hakon!" she cried, in delight. "Why, I didn't know — I didn't expect you, of course. I'll send away the horse at once."

Hakon had climbed half-way up on the steps, and Ruth had descended to meet him. She gave him her little gloved hand that could not withhold its pressure of greeting. With his hat in his other hand, Hakon was strikingly handsome, she thought, especially with that wonderful light in his eyes, and that rare smile on his lips.

"No," he said; "don't send the horse away. Let me get one myself and join you in your ride."

"Will you?" she said, rosy with pleasure at the suggestion. "Oh, that will be splendid!"

The cabman, still waiting for his fare, saw further employment imminent.

"I can soon be returning—if you really wish me to join you," said Hakon, to which Ruth replied, in a murmur meant for him alone:

"I knew I was going to be particularly happy this afternoon. I'll wait as long as you please."

He therefore mounted into the hansom again and was driven swiftly away, Ruth standing still on the steps till the carriage disappeared around the corner, after which she re-entered the house, to occupy a place at the window and watch for his horse and him to come.

He was gone hardly more than fifteen minutes, during which time he had managed not only to secure an excellent animal, but also leggings and a more appropriate coat.

He rode superbly. Ruth, watching him gallop his spirited gelding up the street, held a warm little hand against her burning cheek, and abandoned herself completely to the passionate happiness that she knew she must rigidly repress in his presence. Nevertheless, when she ran down the steps to bid him welcome anew, her eyes were blazing gloriously with her secret and her lips were slightly parted in her rapid breathing.

"Where did you learn to ride?" she demanded. "I'd like to go to the same academy."

"The academy was a prairie and the master was a half-breed Indian cattle-man," he answered, meeting her glance with a sparkle in his eyes. "He made no pretence of riding; he welded himself to the horse and thought nothing further about it."

Suddenly dismounting, he placed her in her saddle with a deftness and strength she had never imagined

he possessed. What a picture of color she was, with her velvet-brown eyes, her mahogany hair, her rose-dappled cheeks, her creamy-white neck and chin, and her lips so red by contrast with her pearl-white teeth! But the color that Hakon saw exclusively was that indefinable gleam, that spark in her eyes, that glowed so warmly for the second that he stood by her glossy bay mare looking up as she sat on her throne.

"Well," she said, mischievously, "if you ever go back to that prairie to take another lesson, why—do let me know."

He was mounting his horse, an operation which he performed with amazing grace and dexterity.

"You wouldn't go?" he said.

"Certainly not, unless you wished it—after you've seen me ride," she answered; and she laughed and blushed together.

Their horses started for the park, walking side by side. Hakon was excited, in a way he had never before experienced. The feelings he had undergone in Miss Sherwood's presence before were all of them renewed, but heightened, intensified by his consciousness of what they meant. He could scarcely keep his eyes from her face. She detected the change in the man's demeanor, and responded with a heart-beat tremendously beyond control.

"You—look very well to-day," he said.

"Don't you mean just happy?" she asked. "I am very fond of riding, even if this isn't a prairie nor you an Indian cattle-boy."

He said, "I'm glad if you are happy."

She asked him, "Why?"

"Well—it's infectious," he answered.

"And weren't you happy before you came?" she inquired.

Hakon was becoming unmanageable to himself.

"I was happy—coming," he confessed, and, unaware of what he was doing, he looked at her quickly, with one of those ardent gazes that reveal everything.

Ruth, equally rebellious against all restraining conventions—all reserve—returned his glance with a silent confession in her eyes that even Hakon partly understood, little versed as he was in the language of a passion supreme over mental, physical, and spiritual attributes alike.

They had come to the park, so freshly, tenderly green. The bridle-path was before them, and into it both the horses turned unguided.

"You were happy coming. . . . I'm—glad," Ruth murmured, almost inaudibly. "Shall we—gallop, or do you prefer to post?"

"Gallop," answered Hakon.

The horses took the rapid pace with an eagerness for which the bright spring day was largely responsible. Exhilaration flung itself upon riders and animals alike, in the rush of the fragrant air they were cleaving. Cares and worries slipped away behind, like things of the winter, impossible in all this newness of nature's joy. Hakon could not partner trouble, strive as he might to think of a method of introducing his vexed and vexing problems. The utmost he could do was to think of Breeme. When the horses were once more walking, he said:

"Oh, I saw a friend of yours this morning—Mr. Breeme."

"Did you?" she answered. "I hope he is well."

"He seems to be, quite."

"Because—I'm very grateful to Mr. Breeme," she added, remembering it was he who had made her

acquainted with John Adams Hakon. "Very grateful."

"So am I," said Hakon, whose reason was the complement of her own. "He has practically decided to 'join the pirates' and return to Albany."

"I don't blame him, not a bit!" said Ruth. "Desperate diseases require desperate remedies. Is there anything new about the presidential outlook—your outlook?"

"Nothing," he said. "Like everything else, it has its dark and its bright aspects, alternately presented." He might have added that it looked particularly bright in her own company and ugly and dark from every other view-point yet discovered; but he held his peace.

"Never mind the dark ones," she counselled, sagely. "When things are brightest, surely that is the time to study the features that seem to be ugly in the gloom. I found that out as a child. It was funny, though, how stumps and rocks would become bears again at night."

"Yes," agreed Hakon, grimly, "an old gray stone certainly seems to present a living menace, when it's more than half obscured by shadows."

"But when you are president, Mr. Hakon," said Ruth, as eagerly as a child, "I wonder if you'll want to know—old friends? Do you suppose you'll ever go riding then—like this?"

"With you?" he blurted out, unguardedly.

"I—didn't say—with me," she faltered. "Just—riding; that's all."

"I don't know," replied Hakon, who had lived a century, he felt, in that half-minute. He added, almost imperceptibly, smiling, "Who was it that said he'd rather be riding than be president?"

"It wasn't you," she answered, archly. "Now, was it?"

"Well—not before to-day, at any rate," he confessed, turning the point adroitly. "To-day a man might say almost anything."

"Because it's bright?" inquired Ruth. "What about to-night?"

To-night! To-night, indeed! What might not happen any one of these nights? And what, for the matter of that, had happened even last night at Graystone's house? He was playing with fire. He was doing a thing that he had no right to do—even this riding out with Ruth Sherwood at his side, she so innocent of all the dark brood of secrets in his mind, and so frank and honest, in her way of youth and courage—this was wrong. Forebodings that rose to color his answer were impotent, however, the moment he looked for a second in her eyes.

"To-night?" he said. "Why—we won't be riding to-night."

"No," she agreed. "And I'm sorry."

His heart was beating on the anvil of his chest, making wonderful chimes of melody.

A reply that was neither discreet nor fair—in the light of all the truth—arose to his lips. He started to speak, a recklessness possessing him utterly. They were just at a crossing, where the path and a winding road for carriages came together. He glanced up and received something very like a shock.

In a brougham, drawn by a striking pair of grays, sat Clara Graystone, eagerly scanning the faces of the socially elect who should next year pay her homage at Washington. Abruptly turning his horse's head, Hakon managed to avoid the glance that Clara

threw for a moment in his direction. Then they once more rode ahead. But for him the day was bright no longer. He felt himself guilty of a new, more despicable meanness—not towards the Graystones, father or daughter, but towards Ruth, who rode at his side.

"I shall be obliged to return to my office rather early," he said. "When I came away I left a ring of quite important keys."

XIII

IT was nearly six o'clock when Hakon returned to his office to secure the keys. The janitor's scrub-woman was sweeping out and dusting the place when he entered.

"Tillegram on the desk, sir," she informed him. " 'Twas on the flure."

"Thank you," said Hakon. Taking up his keys and penknife with one hand and the telegraphic message with the other, he walked out and broke open the envelope.

The message was from Graystone. It read:

" Come up with your gas-wagon at eight this evening, sure. Important."

The easiest part of the message to comprehend was "gas-wagon," by which Hakon knew his automobile was signified. For the rest he was puzzled to know what important business could require his presence at Graystone's, at such an hour of the evening, with his car. He naturally thought of the one topic possible between himself and Graystone—the political game. And aware as he was that the time now remaining at Graystone's disposal before the national convention was brief—that every moment was vital—he felt his excitement rise despite all his other emotions. After such an afternoon as he had spent, a mental exhilaration was not to be

repressed. The mood upon him now was one in which obstacles were belittled and shadows held no terrors. Even his rancor against the man who had tricked him was subsiding. Ruth Sherwood was before his mental vision, her words were in his thoughts; and the look in her eyes—retained tenaciously by his hungering self—ignited his nature and colored all the world.

He read Graystone's telegram again as he walked from the building. Eight o'clock, and with his car. Something there must be in the wind. Somewhere, doubtless, Graystone wished to go—and to go in extraordinary privacy with himself, Hakon, for company. A score of possibilities presented themselves to Hakon's mind, all big with political significance.

He walked up the avenue, arriving at his hotel in a time that seemed amazingly brief, engrossed as his senses were with the import of his message. At the clerk's desk he found another telegram—a duplicate of the one he held in his hand. Graystone had taken no chances. The matter must be one of importance indeed.

With such a temperament as Hakon's, and after his long, unbearable period of political inactivity, escape from excitement was out of the question. With rising elation and mental stir, he consumed, rather than ate, his dinner, exasperated by every delay of the careful, deliberate waiter.

It was half-past seven when he drove to the garage, in a hansom, for his car. Then, as if the moment had been reserved for his torture, the motor in the hood of his large red machine refused to start. Ten precious minutes of time were wasted before a mechanic discovered that his batteries, having been

short-circuited, were run down. It required seven minutes more for the troubles to be overcome. Then, with the monster in the hood raucously coughing out its impatience, the car sped out at the door and went racing away.

As he came in sight of Graystone's house, a trifle after eight, Hakon beheld a closed carriage on the point of departing from the curb. It had evidently brought some visitor—or perhaps even Graystone himself. A moment later Hakon's machine was halted where the hack had been. He stopped the engine, got out, walked about the machine, making a quick inspection of the tires, then ran up the steps.

The servant, who had heard him arrive, threw open the door and conducted him at once to Graystone's study. He entered, and found himself face to face with Graystone. A woman, also in the room, turned about. It was Mrs. Meshe. She had on her hat and a cape of furs. Her hands were gloved. It was she who had just arrived in the carriage.

"Good-evening," said Hakon.

"Say," said Graystone, "I ought to have wired you 'half-past seven' instead of eight. Hakon, I want you to take Mrs. Meshe up-country on a matter of great importance to—to your political interests. You can't start too soon."

"Up-country?" said Hakon.

"Towards White Plains," explained Mrs. Meshe. "I am ready now."

"Yes, get out, Hakon. There's no time to lose," added Graystone. "Mrs. Meshe knows where to go."

"But, if there's any such hurry, the train—" started Hakon, but Graystone interrupted.

"We're not in the advertising business," he said.

"Argue on the road — unless you're prepared to throw up the sponge."

"I don't know how long it will take," said Mrs. Meshe, "but we haven't any time to spare. Are you ready?"

"He's as ready as a radish," answered Graystone.

Taking Hakon by the arm he hustled him towards the door, through which Mrs. Meshe was already disappearing.

In her business-like way she hastened down the hall and out to the curb, where she mounted into the car, occupying the seat next to Hakon's without the slightest ceremony.

Hakon followed. He knew of nothing else to do. Starting his engine, he stepped in beside his passenger, who was deftly arranging her veil; and Graystone, standing in his doorway, saw the car start off with a jerk that did him good.

For fifteen minutes Hakon said nothing. He had no particular liking for the woman at his side, and the big machine, responding to his call for speed, and then anon gliding quietly by a policeman, demanded close attention. His partner ventured no comments, either concerning the business in hand nor the road he was swiftly selecting. She was looking at him from the safety of her veil—watching every motion that he made in controlling the car—admiring the stern, set expression of his face and the steady, penetrative watchfulness of his eyes.

"Do you know any quicker route than this?" he inquired at last.

She answered: "No. We are going to Laconia Park."

Again they became unsocial. Mrs. Meshe preferred the silence in which to study the man at her

side, while Hakon scorned to speak to her on any business which might concern himself.

Out Lenox Avenue, across by little Mount Morris Park, over the Harlem River, with its huge, important bridges, its congested water traffic, and its neighborhood of railroad yards, they sped. Then under the structure of the elevated, and out again on the old Boston Road the car shot hotly on its course. Through West Farms, dull thus early in the evening, they picked up additional speed. Across the lower corner of Bronx Park the old-time highway cut a path beneath the trees. The small but historic Bronx River was passed, then two miles of level country, traversed by the White Plains Road, offered a chance to open the throttle wide. They hurtled through the sharp spring air at a pace that took Mrs. Meshe by surprise. She could hardly have spoken had she wished.

Laconia Park, with its scattered dwellings, bespeaking the country village, modernized and beautified, was presently before them, mapped out in the darkness by its illuminated streets.

"You may let me out at First Avenue," said Mrs. Meshe. "I'll walk from there. I'll meet you there later, as soon as possible—perhaps in an hour, maybe less."

Hakon was relieved, in a measure, to know that he was not to appear in the woman's company during any business interview for which she had come in all this mystery. His resentment rose, however, at the thought of the manner in which he was being employed. He was ready to demand of Mrs. Meshe why it was that some ordinary chauffeur, in some ordinary car, could not have been hired to convey her hither, but he refused to engage in any discussion

with the woman, particularly as the utter futility of such a conversation was distinctly obvious.

He slowed down the auto, and, coming to First Avenue, brought it to a halt. For a moment Mrs. Meshe sat there without moving. Then she put her hand on Hakon's arm and gave it a pressure, ever so slight.

"Oh," she said, "if Gray could drive a car like that!" Then she stepped out briskly and started up the street without another word.

XIV

THE house to which Mrs. Meshe finally came was a modest cottage built close out to the sidewalk. In its upper story the windows were dark. On the lower floor one room only was lighted, apparently. But beholding even so much as this Mrs. Meshe made a sound of relief. She stepped upon the tiny porch and rang the bell at once.

A man it was who opened the door—a small man with eyes very near together and with lines of asceticism graven on his face. His brown mustache was cropped off stiffly.

In the second that she stood there, summing him up, Mrs. Meshe decided that either there was no servant in the cottage or that if there were she had retired for the night. This man was her man.

"Judge Wright?" she said. "Is this Judge Wright?"

"I am Judge Wright, yes, madam," responded the man. "Did you wish to see me?"

"If I may," said Mrs. Meshe. She had lifted her veil. The color in her cheeks, as a result of the ride, had heightened her beauty. The man in the door had never seen a woman more imperious.

She walked into the hall without further waiting for an invitation.

"I have come to see you on some very important business," she imparted at once. "Are you at liberty for a few moments' private conversation?"

"Wait a minute," answered the judge, who had scanned her over sharply.

He disappeared into the one lighted room. Mrs. Meshe glanced about at various college emblems from Yale and Vassar with which the hall was decorated. She heard a muffled sound of voices, the judge's and a woman's, after which there were other sounds, as of quick footsteps, a hurried "cleaning up," and the closing of some interior door. The man then reappeared.

"Will you please come in," he said. "And pray excuse a somewhat domestic appearance. My wife—We can talk here—anything you have to say to me—I suppose?"

"Indeed, this is quite delightful," answered Mrs. Meshe.

She took a seat and pulled off one of her gloves, revealing a dazzling constellation of diamonds upon her fingers.

"Judge Wright," she said, "I came here this evening in behalf of an acquaintance, recently on trial in your court, I believe, and about to be sentenced—to-morrow morning, in fact."

The judge's face was hardening. He had been noting every detail of her costume, veil and all. The dust that lay in the folds of her jacket did not escape him. He ferreted out a deduction with a shrewd sort of assiduity.

"You came in an automobile," he said. "And from New York."

Mrs. Meshe smiled entrancingly. "You are very clever, Judge Wright," she said. "I did."

The man was flattered, but no less suspicious.

"Did you come to try to get Oluff freed?" he demanded, with exaggerated severity.

"I came to see if there is anything a friend can do," she confessed. "If a fine—even a large fine—could be imposed, instead of imprisonment, his friends would be very—"

"Well, it can't be done!" interrupted the judge. "Oluff is a low-down, corrupting tool! If you know him, you know it! He's been fairly trapped, and he's going to go to prison—for the full term of the law. He'll receive the extreme penalty, madam—the extreme penalty—the first thing in the morning!"

"I shouldn't have thought you so harsh," said Mrs. Meshe, gently. "Your appearance belies this spirit. The man has a family. Surely a fine—"

"No! A fine will not be a punishment!" he broke in, savagely. "It would be condoning his crimes. I refuse to do anything lenient in such a case. You've come to the wrong man, madam. Coming to me in an automobile! I am not one of your automobile judges. Luxury and ease! Automobiles worth ten and fifteen thousand dollars!"

"Would you like an automobile?" inquired Mrs. Meshe, looking him straight in the face, her languorous eyes a-kindle with the sort of light that illumines the path to hell.

A flame of avarice burned for a second in the judge's near-together pupils. Then the stubborn, bigoted look of a fanatic came again to his visage.

"No," he said, "I don't want anything that Oluff's class of friends can offer. . . . I wouldn't be bothered running an automobile."

With quick perceptions Mrs. Meshe had taken in the features of the room. Certain scraps of cloth upon the floor addressed her woman's mind with phases of household economy. The arts of patching and reconstructing were not unknown to herself,

when she delved in her memory of a time ten years departed. Mrs. Wright, she knew, was scraping and pinching, doubtless, for the boy at Yale and the girl at Vassar.

"Oh, to be sure," she said, "many wealthy people wouldn't be bothered with a car. They might prefer horses, or a modern residence, or to educate their children in comfort. Some like a trip abroad; and women like handsome new gowns. All women hate to sew. . . . But we are getting quite domestic. I feel sure that if you knew this Mr. Oluff better—"

"If I knew him any better," interrupted the judge, "I should probably be tempted to exceed the law in pronouncing his sentence. If you came here to offer me a bribe—"

"I beg your pardon, Judge Wright," interposed Mrs. Meshe. "Have I mentioned money? I have only come to ask you if it may not be possible to punish the man by imposing a heavy fine upon him. Surely the law would be satisfied. Even if his fine were ten thousand dollars, or fifteen thousand dollars, his friends would gladly pay it—pay it twice over." She put a peculiar accent on the word "twice," which did not escape the notice of the judge. She waited for a moment, and then added, "Cannot something be done?"

"No," he said, less aggressively, "I don't think anything can be done for Charles Oluff. The maximum fine is only ten thousand dollars. And to pay that would be no punishment."

"But twice that sum would be a punishment, most certainly," insisted Mrs. Meshe. "And, of course, you have nothing against the man personally?"

"I tell you I won't listen to—" started the judge,

when an interruption in the shape of a knock on the door that led to another apartment halted his utterance.

"Oh, Hannibal," said a female voice, "there is something I cannot find up-stairs. May I see you for a moment?"

"Excuse me," said the judge. He arose at once and left the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

Instantly Mrs. Meshe started to her feet, crossed the floor, and listened at the door. She could hear the voice of a woman—the judge's wife, she was certain—in excited murmurings of argument. With a satisfied smile upon her lips the temptress glided noiselessly back to her seat. That the judge's wife had listened to all the conversation from the farther side of that door, she was certain. That the judge's wife was her ally there could be no doubt in her trained, intuitive mind. She took up a magazine, borrowed from some small local library, and patiently turned the pages, in none of which she took the slightest interest.

It was fully twenty minutes before the consultation in the farther room was concluded. Then with a show of making much noise as he came, the judge at length reappeared.

"Small family affairs take up a great deal of time," he said, in an apologetic awkwardness quite transparent to his guest. "Sorry to have kept you waiting. What was it I was saying just before I had to see about—to-morrow's supply of coal?"

"You were saying you thought Oluff's punishment might possibly be commuted to a fine," said Mrs. Meshe, boldly going at once to the point which she knew the man now desired to approach.

"Did I put it just that way?" he asked her, weakly.

"You put it very much more lucidly and ably than that," she answered. "Would you like to have the—the *double* part of his fine paid into court—say, here?"

"Well—I hadn't thought—just what the fine will be."

"If the maximum is ten thousand—" started Mrs. Meshe, but she saw his look of disappointment and added, adroitly, "or you might have been mistaken. It might have been fifteen thousand dollars."

"It may be fifteen thousand," he agreed, with a sickly grin. "One's memory, of course— I believe it was fifteen thou—"

Again there came a knock upon the door.

"Hannibal," said the female voice. "The—the bath-room— Would you mind just coming for a moment?"

Again he excused himself and disappeared. He returned, however, quite promptly.

"I was just thinking over that penalty," he said, averting his gaze and fumbling with a book that lay on the table. "I believe it reads twenty thousand dollars."

The man was as white as the paper in his book. Mrs. Meshe regarded him coldly.

"And where ought that sum to be paid, into court?" she inquired.

The man tried to speak, but found himself obliged to cough.

"Why," he finally answered, with a poor imitation of off-handedness, "perhaps here, as you suggested, would do as well as any other place."

"And when?" said the cold, even voice of the temptress, now successful.

The judge was hemming and coughing, in an effort

to stiffen the backbone so recently grafted into his being by the influence on the other side of that closed door. Now, in his faltering, a sharp sound issued from the apartment to which he had twice retired. He looked up at the wall, and his gaze encountered a small Yale flag above the door.

"When?" he repeated. "Well—perhaps it had better be to-night. To-night by twelve o'clock. . . . And a fine like that should be in small bank-bills—fives and ones."

The look of bigotry had become one of something vastly different as the man's near-together eyes were focussed for a second on the countenance of the woman whom he dared no longer face.

"Oluff is to be sentenced to-morrow morning," he added. "I have nothing more to say."

"Very good," said Mrs. Meshe, who had recognized a well-known precaution in the stipulation for small bills that could never be traced. "It's fortunate—sometimes — that we have our automobiles. By twelve o'clock, if possible. Good-night."

"Good-night," said the judge, and he followed to the door, through which she disappeared in haste before the fine should again be raised.

XV

HAKON became impatient and still further annoyed at the wait forced upon him by Mrs. Meshe. He distrusted the whole affair. It smacked of things too dark for decency, he was certain. Yet, on the other hand, if it signified much to the great political game—he was too far involved already to begin to look about for virtuous ground on which to stand while others conducted affairs of weight.

The few passers-by who noted how long he was halting believed his car was disabled. One or two asked if they could render assistance. One individual in particular persisted in offering Samaritan offices till Hakon was obliged to state that there was some minor difficulty with the spark-plug, and to prove it was now all right he started the car up the street, made a long detour, and returned to his post.

Inasmuch as any manner of activity was to be preferred to mere waiting, he continued to run the car slowly about the deserted streets, always winding again to his corner, from which he described a set of concentric circles. He was two blocks away, and running slowly back to his centre, when at last he beheld the tall, fine figure of Mrs. Meshe awaiting his arrival at the rendezvous.

He soon brought the car to a stop beside her.

"I was keeping the engine warm," he said.

"An excellent idea," Mrs. Meshe responded, stepping briskly in beside him. "I hope it is warm enough to take us back in a hurry."

He tooled the machine about in the road, threw in his intermediate speed-gears, then his direct connection, and the car was almost immediately flying.

Mrs. Meshe waited for fully five minutes, expecting Hakon to inquire how the business had succeeded. He was quite as silent as a clam. She therefore volunteered her information.

"I have only partially concluded a very important matter," she said, during a moment in which he slacked the speed for a dark bit of road. "I believe a man of Gray's will be obliged to return and finish the business. I should like to stop at the first public 'phone and ring up New York."

"There is one at the Thrushwood Inn," he said. "We can stop there if you wish."

"If you please," she requested.

Again the car sped through the wind and conversation became impracticable. A run of three miles was made in five minutes, the huge lights on the front of the car sweeping roadside trees and turns of the highway with their broadside of concentrated glare.

When they halted before the partly darkened inn, Mrs. Meshe was so closely veiled that her face was completely masked. She required no assistance from Hakon, but hastened at once to the 'phone, shutting herself in the tiny booth with much alacrity.

Graystone, expecting a message, answered sharply from his study.

"Done?" he demanded.

"For twenty," she answered.

"Wanted, I suppose, in a hurry, as usual?"

She said: "At twelve to-night, and all in fives and ones."

"All right," said Graystone. "Who's to take it?"

"Oh, the king," she replied. "Have him ready by the time we arrive. 'Bye."

Hakon, meanwhile, instinctively mortified every time a lounger of the inn passed by on the porch and scrutinized himself and the car, was immeasurably relieved to have Mrs. Meshe return promptly.

"All right, and everything working smoothly," she assured him. "I wish we had time to enjoy the ride."

Hakon felt that he had enjoyed quite sufficient of her company as it was. He said, "Yes," by which he might have meant any one of a dozen things, as his passenger was fully aware.

She was just a trifle piqued by the man's unconcealed coldness. Despite herself she liked him—or admired his strength—or something. She had found him magnetic before. The impression to-night had increased. She made no effort to thrust a conversation upon him, however; for to-night, at least, business was paramount.

It was after eleven o'clock when they arrived at length at Graystone's house. He came out to meet them himself.

"Hakon, you are a brick," he said. "You deserve big things—and you'll get them. Sorry you'll have to go back there again in a rush."

"Well, I don't know that I—" started Hakon, exasperated by Graystone's manner as well as by the whole of the evening's transactions.

"Now, don't balk in a matter like this," interrupted Graystone. "In our hands, aren't you? Willing to do a little something, aren't you? Just go over

to Broadway, along this cross street, and stop at a coal-dealer's office. You can't miss it. Take the man there back to the same place, up-country. He's waiting for you now."

Mrs. Meshe added: "When you get to that First Avenue, go up the street two blocks, then turn to your left. It's the third house from the corner."

Hakon was almost on the point of refusing, let the cost be what it might.

"I don't like this," he said. "I don't like it at all!"

"Neither do I," answered Graystone. "If there's any quitting done, we'll all quit together. Go on, John, you're losing time that means more than money. Coal-yard, corner of Broadway."

He took Mrs. Meshe by the arm and led her up the steps. Hakon was still sitting in his car, undecided, when the door of the house was closed.

"Damn him, anyway!" said he, but he guided his car down the street according to directions.

As Graystone had said, the man in waiting in the dimly lighted office was evidently ready. The automobile had no more than halted than the new prospective passenger put out the light that showed so redly through the window, and appeared outside.

"Friend of Mrs. Meshe's?" he inquired, cautiously.

Hakon said: "I suppose so. Yes."

"Can't never make it by twelve," stated the man.

He returned to the office, caught up a heavy bag that lay there concealed, and, locking the door behind him, brought his burden to the car.

"I'll ride in be'ind," he announced. Placing his bag in the tonneau, he sat there himself and closed the door at the rear, adding, "Leave her go."

Once more Hakon's impulse was to abandon the whole transaction, instantly. He felt convinced that

the man's bag was heavy with money, but he could not be certain. He believed the affair to be one of curruption, but, recoiling from the thought, preferred to know nothing about it. He was still at a loss to know why he himself had been impressed in such mysterious transactions. What difference could it make who it was that drove the car?

He had started ahead, even as these and other reflections recurred to his mind. He began to think he understood a little of Graystone's scheming. It was doubtless a plan to cement their union more indissolubly—a plan to thrust a semi-illicit partnership upon him, Hakon, and make him a genuine associate, not only politically, but likewise in other ways too obscure to be stated.

Were it not that the presidency— Were it not that Ruth— He suddenly ceased to repeat these wretched justifications. He was too far involved already, as he had told himself before, to withdraw; he was already tarred with the stick he would use for painting Graystone. There was one point, however, to which he clung. He did not know what this business signified to-night, and therefore he could never be said to have lent himself to it willingly or advisedly.

The man behind him said nothing, until at last the car was once more annihilating space. Then he leaned forward and bawled against the rush of wind:

"She don't hit nuthin' but the high spots—hey?"

Nevertheless, it was nearly one o'clock in the morning when at length Hakon turned, as before, into Laconia Park's First Avenue. Here he slowed down the car, and, following the directions supplied by Mrs. Meshe, guided the auto quietly along and stopped at length at the third house from the corner.

The street was absolutely deserted and silent. In the house to which they had come a single light was burning, and that but dimly, in the hall. It shone through the transom, thereby revealing the number in dark silhouette against the background of orange. At the edge of the sidewalk stood a street-lamp, its incandescent glow throwing a strong illumination across the tiny porch of the cottage.

"That's the number, O. K.," muttered the man in the tonneau, and promptly alighting he lifted out his bulky bag and carried it quickly to the door.

He rang the bell but once. Light as the sound of Hakon's car had been, there were ears within the house that had caught its purring. The door was opened without delay.

Hakon was watching. He beheld a female figure clad only in a white night-robe. It was the judge's wife, who had come to receive the "fine."

"Here it is," said the man who had arrived with the bag. He grasped it by the bottom to dump out its contents.

"Oh!" said the woman.

In despair of anything else in which to receive it, and in too much haste to wait, she caught up the front of her night-robe and held it, as she might have held an apron to receive a quart of apples.

Without the slightest hesitation the man swung up his burden and emptied the bag into the frail receptacle. The heavy bundles of bank-bills partially dragged the garment from her shoulder. A few of them fell upon the floor.

The man came back and climbed in the car, taking the seat which Mrs. Meshe had recently occupied.

"Well, say," said he, "now what d'ye think of that?"

XVI

AT his office the following afternoon, John Hakon received a message from Breeme, who called him up on the 'phone.

"Say, we lost that trick, after all," he said. "That case, you know, that I was telling you about—Charlie Oluff, tried for bribery. . . . He got off with a fine. I don't know the inside facts, of course, but it looks as if some one was sweetened."

With this and the meagre straws of information supplied by the man with whom he had ridden home the night before, Hakon swiftly constructed a theory of Graystone's machinations sufficiently accurate in all essential particulars to arouse him to an indignation greater than anything he had yet experienced in all this ill-begotten alliance. He knew at last that he, as much as Mrs. Meshe, or the coarse, illiterate fellow who had carried the sack full of money, had been used as a tool—and a mean, small tool at that. He knew that Graystone had purposely snared him in this shameless affair to debase him, and so to secure a greater hold upon him. He knew that there was nothing so contemptible that Graystone would not stoop to perform it, either directly or by proxy, from selling his daughter to dealing in slime from the gutters of corruption. He knew that Graystone would sacrifice anything and any one to gain his ends; that the monumental lust for power

actuating all that Graystone did was beyond a normal comprehension.

But the shame to himself it was that enraged Hakon, who had found himself tricked already, till exasperation knew no bounds. He began to doubt whether he would ever be able to outwit this man or to score a single point against him. Even in a hot contemplation of retreat, abandonment of the entire project, he could see no satisfaction. He himself would be the one who had lost; Graystone would possess even greater power for his utter humiliation.

In his anger to-day the element of personality was conspicuous. He would have given glad welcome to any mental suggestion of a plan whereby he might wound Graystone's vanity—inflict some punishment that should sting the man to the depths of his being. But nothing of which he could think provided the opportunity for which he longed. Indeed, his rage was as futile as his position was helpless. He was not a match, in diabolism, for any such a creature. He knew no tricks to play in such a game.

It afforded a grim, if meagre, satisfaction to Hakon's mind to contemplate the wrath Amos Graystone would exhibit, later on, when he should find that the man made president by his shameless devices was proving a Nemesis to organized gluttony and to all the swarm of money-bred maggots hatched and fostered by the syndicate of which he was the master-spirit. In this way, and no other, could the score be evened. To shrink from his self-appointed rôle at such a time as this would be but a weakness, he was quite convinced. He had gone too far to retreat with either courage or honor. He owed it to himself, as much as to the nation, to go on to the end

and make the sacrifice commendable, at least to himself.

He paced up and down the floor of his office all morning long, unable to abate the anger which burned in his thoughts so often as Graystone's voice or face returned to his memory. He felt belittled as well as baffled to be obliged to admit to himself his utter inability to strike the magnate back, even so much as one sharp blow. He appeared to himself like a weakling in this paucity of resource for invention. His mood was denied satisfaction in anything save his promise to himself that when his moment should finally arrive he would strike a blow with all his accumulated wraths behind it. He must bide his time.

Shortly after noon the postman arrived with a letter from Clara. It proved to be another scented effusion in which she hoped she would see him at least once every day. By way of a gentle hint, to supplement the theme on which she had dwelt at their latest meeting, she reverted to rings. "If ever I *do* wear a ring," she wrote, "I should want it to be one that would please you first. I hope you like sapphires, for they signify 'constancy,' and diamonds, for they mean 'purity' and prevent storms."

At one end of her note she had signed, "Ever with *Constancy*, yours, Clara."

Somewhat of loathing and disgust arose in Hakon's nature to keep his anger company. That he could ever love Clara Graystone was an abandoned hope; that he should grow to respect and esteem her was almost equally doubtful. Utterly impatient of the quandary in which he found himself, he yet found thinking and scheming utterly futile. To give up his presidential aspirations and free himself from

Graystone and Clara together—to do this and then go to Ruth and tell her of the passion in his heart—what could be more idly vain? It was the presidential game that awoke any interest that Ruth might feel in his being. And what could he say in explanation of his abandonment of the enterprise, what that would not demean him in her estimate?

In desperation it is human to wish for things impossible. Hakon wished, a dozen times over, that he and Ruth might have met and been married a year before—or at any time prior to this wretched alliance with Graystone. Then he leaped to still another madness of thought—a momentary consideration of the plan of confronting Graystone with the announcement that he must refuse to marry his daughter—that he would accept the presidential nomination foot-free or not at all.

He knew in the next instant it would defeat his own purposes only. He made a sound of anger and anguish together. Insane ambition would not permit him to abandon all the game, after what he had seen and heard to confirm his confidence that the nomination was almost as good as secured. He could not cool the fever that fired his blood at the thought of achieving this tremendous distinction. If Graystone had trapped him—it was equally true that he himself had been quite unable to resist the bait. Even now he could not consent to leave the trap with the bait still enticing him onward.

In the midst of his conflict of emotions the bell of his 'phone sharply demanded his attention. Graystone was on the wire.

"Come down, right away," he said. "I'll be waiting."

Hakon was with him in twenty minutes. Senn, the taciturn, was also in the room.

"How are you?" said Graystone. "I wanted to warn you that the Western papers have broken out with a brand-new boom for you as the coming presidential nominee, in spite of all we could do to keep things simmering along quietly. Three of them want you to speak up and say where you are and what your views are going to be. I don't want you to talk at all."

"There is no immediate danger of my talking," said Hakon.

"Yes, there is," corrected Graystone. "If a good reporter gets at you, you'll talk, whether you think you're saying anything or not. I know reporters. Don't see any—that's the only way to keep your mouth shut, as long as you are human. Don't see any one. Keep out of sight. Get away from town, and go out in the country as often as you can. If you get caught, refer to your record of the past and look like a sphinx. I'll see that the papers get all I want them to print. That's all. Good-bye."

Hakon was not in a mood to be dismissed before he could speak a word for himself concerning all that lay in his mind.

"I want you to know," he said, "that I discovered that the 'work' I did last night was not at all in the interests of the presidential fight. I presume you planned it to despoil me, if possible, of my last remnant of self-respect."

Senn was almost guilty of a smile. It was he who had planned the measure whereby his chief had secured a fresher hold upon their candidate.

"My dear John," said Graystone, in brutal frankness, "a man with your ambitions ought to be a

Roman when he comes to Rome. In a happy family like ours we are all alike and none of us haughty. Besides, you will need all the practice you can get."

Hakon looked at him steadily for a moment, thinking of what would happen when his day should finally come.

"Yes," he said, "perhaps I shall." And he left the room at once.

That same afternoon three things occurred that were fated to complicate affairs even further, if possible, than before.

First, Hakon wrote and sent a note to Ruth, asking if he might not call on the following day and take herself and Mrs. Hobart for a ride in his car. He was obeying Graystone's instructions to get out in the country.

Secondly, in his Broadway temple of might Amos Graystone convened a meeting of the powers, where fifteen politicians, of various stripes and colorings, held a stormy conclave, only to be whipped into line by the master-hand relentlessly. When they had finally dispersed, Hakon's chances for becoming the party's nominee for president were about as certain as anything may be that yet remains entirely human.

Lastly, Clara Graystone received a visit from an old-time admirer, who had recently been abroad and who had now come back with the deliberate intention of paying court to money. He had been induced to remain nearly all afternoon, for Clara, in her newly flattered state of mind, was particularly delighted with her new opportunity of exciting admiration.

XVII

IT was not entirely political excitement nor increased resentment against Amos Graystone and his methods that affected Hakon so profoundly when he came to his office the following day. Some tumult of feeling far deeper ingrained than either emotion had possessed him ever since sending that note to Ruth Sherwood. Despite the fact that another meeting with Ruth would mean no more than the last, he was, nevertheless, a victim to a thousand peculiar sensations when he found that no answer to his letter had arrived by the early delivery.

He had passed a wretched night, worried and angered by Graystone and his methods, harassed by every contemplation of Clara, goaded to new desperations of regret and indecision by the plight of his mind and nature respecting Ruth.

He could not work, he could not stand staring from the window. He strode up and down across the floor. When at last the postman came with Ruth's reply, he could hardly break the envelope for nervousness.

She had written three words:

"Yes. Come early."

The color mounted to his face in a tidal flood. His heart rocked heavily. He snatched out his watch, only to find the day absurdly young—ten o'clock. This was a disappointment, yet a certain delirious

joy engulfed his being. Some singular intensity of feeling was adrift in his pulses.

How he urged and coaxed on the laggard hours of the day he scarcely knew. At half-past one he halted his car before the Hobart house, and was presently waiting alone in the drawing-room, with which he had become slightly familiar.

Ruth, when she appeared a moment later, gave him a welcome so cordial that new exhilaration spurred on his already racing delight.

"But Alice isn't here," she added, "and she may not return. She was obliged to meet another appointment, and hardly knew when she might get back. She thought we'd be foolish to wait any later than two, and she said we'd better go by then if she were still detained. Do you mind?"

"Waiting?" said Hakon.

"No; our going alone."

Their eyes met. Ruth was quite as excited as he. The light he saw in her joyous glance intoxicated his senses.

"I'm afraid I wanted the ride with you, chiefly," he confessed. "But we will wait till two."

"I am not quite ready, anyway," she answered. "I'll hurry. And I've brought you something to look at while you're waiting."

From her dress she drew a packet of letters—three in number—tied about with a faded bit of ribbon.

"These belonged to my mother," she said. "I found them among her effects. They are letters written to her father—my grandfather—by your father. You see she treasured every little thing that concerned a Hakon. I thought perhaps you'd like to see them, or to read them, while I'm getting on my things."

Hakon took them from her hand in a grave way of reverence that was almost boyish.

"This is a great surprise," he said, in a voice peculiarly subdued. "A great surprise and pleasure. You are very thoughtful—Ruth."

She crimsoned suddenly with excitement and pleasure thus to hear him speak her name.

"I'm glad—so glad you are pleased," she said; and seeing how his eyes were fastened on the well-known writing in which the topmost address appeared, she added: "I know you want to see them. I shall soon be coming back."

At the door she paused for a moment, and met the gaze with which he had followed her with eyes so softly luminous that the man lost a beat of his heart.

Then, when she was gone, his eyes returned to the packet in his hand. He sat down and opened it slowly. The first letter that he drew from its faded envelope was a graceful little outburst of congratulations in which it was made quite plain that another happy anniversary of the marriage of Ruth's grandfather to her grandmother had been about to arrive. The old-time boyish fondness that Hakon had felt for his father came stealing upon him as he looked at the carefully worded lines. He thought it was rare, indeed, in these later days, for two men to think of these little courtesies and compliments.

The second letter was one of condolence for a death in the Chester family. Hakon read every word, little as all of it could mean to one so far removed from these by-gone scenes and days.

On beholding the third communication he was abruptly made the victim of intense emotion. He saw at a glance that the purport or body of the writing

was not entirely new to his ken. Then, in greatly increasing excitement, he read:

"My dear Friend,—I trust you will pardon me for encroaching still further upon your valued time with more of the business relating to that burdensome and worrying Blue Gap bridge. It is only because of the interest you have taken heretofore that I send you this copy of a letter I have just felt obliged to write to my engineer in charge, with whom, as you know, I have had a few troubles before."

Hakon's eyes abruptly scanned the appended lines:

"In my hurried departure from the works yesterday, I may not have left you sufficiently impressed with latest instructions. This is merely in the nature of a memorandum. Please remember that you are hereby reminded that you must not use the lighter girders, for the sake of economy. This is imperative. I was glad to note your progress at abutment 2."

For a moment Hakon stared at the letter in utter incredulity. The words of it swung dizzily about. Perspiration broke from his forehead abruptly as he reread it all in feverish haste.

He started from his chair and hastened to the window, where he almost pinched a hole through the parchment of the note beneath that all-important little word "not." It was there! There could be no doubt about it—not a doubt in the world. Then how—

His mind leaped backward, five years, to that night when Senn had come to see him and force him to withdraw from the senatorial fight—that night when his father's own letter—that utterly damning and blighting letter—had been placed in his hands. Then how could this be?—this letter in his hand?

Suddenly, with a clearness and distinctness photo-

graphic, he beheld again that sheet of paper that had shattered so much in his life. He could see every word, as plainly as he saw these words in his hand. He read it again, with his eyes tightly closed: "Please remember that you are hereby reminded that you must—use."

He got no further than that. He saw through the miserable trick at last. The line had been carried over from the margin of the sheet, and "reminded that you must" were the final words of the line. The "not" had been removed, doubtless by the use of acids that left no trace behind. The blank, he remembered vividly, was there at the end of that fateful line; and through all these years he had suffered shame for the heartless trick which had robbed him of his veneration for his father.

The man could have wept to have this present letter in his hands. It was almost as precious as his mother's wedding-ring, which he wore upon his little finger. He pressed the paper hotly to his lips as the flood of love and respect he had always known for his father rushed so tremendously upon him. In his overwhelming gladness he had no time for the rage at Senn and his brood that would surge throughout his veins in appropriate season. To him it was all as if his father had come home from a long, heart-breaking absence—come home with his two hands white and honest and fearless, as they had always been before his departure.

"Father!" he said, in a murmur not to be repressed. And the tears welled out of his eyes.

There were traces of them still remaining when Ruth presently returned to the room. She checked herself when about to speak, beholding the signs of his emotion.

"I— You have made me very happy through these letters," he said, striving his utmost to reassume control of his feelings. "I wonder if you could —let me keep them—for my own?"

"I shall feel so gratified to give them to you, if you want them," she answered. "It makes me happy to think they were mine to give."

He had loved her before. His passion now was one of positive adoration, gone utterly beyond the logic of argument.

He was speechless in the might and tumult of the ecstasy that claimed him for its own. Every atom of his power of control over himself was in swift requisition. To save himself, as well as Ruth, he deliberately turned his eyes from hers and stared again at the letters retained in his hand. Then, as one in a dream, he placed all three envelopes in his pocket and forced himself to think of the moment.

"What about Mrs. Hobart?" he said. "It is just about two o'clock."

"Let's go," answered Ruth. "I know she isn't coming."

She led the way quickly, and Hakon followed. Running down the steps, presently, she stood beside the car, excitedly looking it over. Hakon started the engine and helped her into the seat beside his own.

"Which way shall we go?" she inquired.

He had given the matter no thought. In a swift decision not to traverse the roads over which he had taken either Clara Graystone or Mrs. Meshe, he swiftly appraised all the highways readily available.

"I know of some very good roads on Long Island," he answered. "Once we get to Prospect Park it is all quite inviting."

"I should like to see Prospect Park, anyway," said Ruth.

The car was therefore headed for an East River ferry, and in due season not only Prospect Park, but also miles of the roads that lie beyond had contributed much to Ruth's uncontainable delight.

Her undisguised enjoyment of every moment, together with the glorious sunshine of the day and the madness in his nature, were working some havoc in Hakon's self-control. He appeared peculiarly silent, peculiarly absorbed in the mechanics of operating the car. As a matter of fact, he was steering automatically, for a madness, in partial possession of his senses before the start, had grown with every passing moment since Ruth had been here at his side.

Out through lonely new villages they sped, down country roads where only freshness of air and sunshine gave them welcome—and madness was pressing on Hakon more and more. It was not, however, till he beheld a sign-post, indicating the way and distance to a near-by village, that he felt a wild idea abruptly crystallizing in his mind. Even then he ran the car another mile in absolute silence before he was quite overmastered by his impulse. Then he suddenly halted the big machine by the side of the road, where nature had expended more than ordinary arts to make the scene a place of charm and beauty. The engine continued to run almost noiselessly.

"What is it?" said Ruth. "Is anything misbehaving?"

"Yes," he answered; "I think something is."

She looked at him quickly. His tone sounded peculiar.

"You are worried," she said, for she had not divined the all that was meant by the strange expression on his face.

"Yes—I'm worried," he confessed, still strangely. "You are the only one who can help me. And we've been acquainted—how long is it now?"

"Years," she said, "if I can really help. Is it something about your political fight—or the car?"

"The fight and other things, all strangely interrelated," he said, moistening his dry lips with an effort. "There is much that cannot be told—and yet—to-day I can't keep it back. I— Ruth—this wasn't intended—but I want to ask a very great —honor—of you."

"An—honor?" she said, crimsoning, as she felt she half understood, yet found herself a little puzzled. "What is it I can do?"

Hakon had a singular directness in much that he did and said. It came to him now.

"Ruth," he answered, "I have found that I love you. I didn't mean to take an advantage. This was not premeditated. But I want you to become my wife. I want you—"

"Mr. Hakon!" she said, in a way of intensity that interrupted what he meant to add. "You—"

There she halted, unable to speak while emotions hurled themselves upon her, as if from his eyes, which were gazing straight into hers with a look so passionate and tender, so demanding and pleading, so compelling and revealing, that to think had suddenly become impossible.

It was love in naked beauty, unashamed and glorified, that she saw—and comprehended. It was such a love as left her powerless, yielding—a glad, wildly fluttering captive. It was what she had hoped

for, dreamed of, asked for in her prayers. But its coming, so abruptly, had cleaved her heart in twain in its madness to enter, while the tiny door was standing wide open. She felt she had no answer ready —that none dared arise to her lips.

"John," she added, faintly, still faltering, "I— can't quite—"

He saw how startled, indeed, she was, but he saw even more—the leap of joy's beacon to her eyes. He hastened to finish his speech.

"I want you to marry me—in secret—Ruth—and to-day, if you will!" he told her, in his relentless way of directness. "That is what I stopped the car to say."

She met his gaze steadily, and he was quenching the thirst of his eyes as he looked upon her.

She saw the doubt, the flicker of melancholy obscure the brighter light in his expression, but still undimmed burned that torch of love, aflame now forever in his eyes.

"I know I haven't the right to ask you this," he said, "but I— Yes, I have the right—even to that! I love you. I have the right, but not the privilege to say all this—to ask such a favor. I love you, Ruth—with all my hope in God Almighty! And I shouldn't ask this thing to-day were I not driven by everything within me. I know it's a shock. I was shocked myself when I suddenly thought of it back there a mile. I know you might distrust me; that we are wholly unacquainted—as to point of time. I know you could not care for me as I care for you. But—we seemed such natural partners! The thought that I might not have you for my wife—Ruth, I'm tortured!"

He ceased to speak, for her silence discouraged the

sensitive hope in his breast. She was looking at him oddly, trying to fathom the reason why she was willing to do this thing he asked, trying to know why it was that she loved him so tremendously. She was numbed, and all her thinking was somewhat automatic. She knew she could never deny him what he asked, but neither could her maidenly nature consent to abrupt surrender nor her mind agree to anything dubious.

Hakon could read nothing but her lingering reserve.

"I am mad," he said, smiling now in a sad way that cut her to the quick. "When I found out what it all meant—that it was love that possessed me, I thought it was—a little, at least—because you cared for me. I have had no experience. I have loved no other woman. I have never wished to marry before. I don't know love or what it means. I only know that I love you for every year, every day of my life, gone so lovelessly from me. I am selfish, absurd. But I had to say it all right now. I couldn't wait. It was ignorance that made me think perhaps you loved me in return."

She was fingering the cushion whereon she sat. She had finally averted her eyes from his.

"I do love you, John," she said. "I couldn't help it."

She said no more, and he could make no immediate response. He sat perfectly still, looking at her from eyes grown more than merely grave. Slowly he put his hand to his forehead and moved it across his brow and down his cheek. He had made that gesture all his life.

At last he said, again with a faint, melancholy smile, "I am waiting to hear you say 'but.'"

She looked up steadily, her nature yearning over him as she saw again how pale and worried he appeared. She wanted to help him; she wanted to be his wife.

"There is no 'but' for me to say," she answered. "I love you because I can't help it—and because I want to."

Still he made no motion towards her, no gesture as if to take her hand or even to touch her dress.

"Enough—to marry me?" he asked.

She nodded silently, dropping her eyes.

"In secret?" he insisted.

"Why must it be in secret, John?" she inquired of him, earnestly. "I love you enough for anything. Has it something to do with your presidential hopes?"

He said: "It has everything to do with my hopes—my chances. I shall abandon it all—to-day, if you and I—if this cannot be done."

And in the newly aroused spirit which Ruth had awakened in his being, he would have done what he said, absolutely. He could no longer consent, after this, to bear the thought of losing her, let the cost to aspirations be whatsoever it might.

Ruth said: "You know how much I wish to have you become president."

"But to-day I'm not trading on that," he told her, abruptly. "I am going to do my best to win! I am going to do my best, if elected, to be the whole nation's president—the common people's president! But to-day I am asking what I ask in the name of love alone. I hate secrets. Were this one avoidable I would gladly scorn its refuge. I would wait forever to make you my wife, if you wished it and fate made it possible. But as things have come, it has

to be a secret—until after election is over. I dare not tell you why—dare not repeat it to myself. It may not even be fair, except as all things are fair in love and war. But this much is true—it is not an unfairness to you. I love you. Will you do this, Ruth—and trust me?"

She got out of the car and walked across the road, looking down at the grass with unseeing eyes for a moment. Then she turned about and slowly returning faced him bravely.

"I knew I would do it—from the first," she confessed. "I suppose I'd do almost anything you might wish. That's what love demands—my sort of love! But, John—a secret marriage— The secret must be kept—from my hands—my lips—from everything but my heart. We cannot have a secret that will make us anything but glad and happy—till the time you need is past."

Hakon knew what she meant; and hungering as he was to leap from his seat and take her in his arms, he loved her the more for what she had said. By his faith in her womanly beauty he could have known she would make this condition. He himself would have made it, equally as a matter of course.

He said: "Yes, we would keep it a secret so—even if death itself were imminent."

They were silent for a moment. Neither moved to bridge the space between them. Already a hallowed abyss was dividing hand from hand and glance from glance.

"Where—shall we go—to have it done?" she asked at length.

"To this little village beyond," he answered. "There is a magistrate there who owes me a very

great favor. It was that, I confess, that made me think of asking."

She climbed up into her seat slowly. In a half-frightened voice she said: "If we had to go far, I'm afraid I'd change my mind."

XVIII

NOTWITHSTANDING her nervous apprehension, Ruth experienced a certain mad delight as the car sped swiftly towards the village, so near at hand. Her love for Hakon was as passionate as his own; she was quite as impulsive and quickly decided as he was himself. The glorious sunlight and the balm of spring in the air had affected them both, to a degree fairly perilous, in conjunction with the new bond which had suddenly sprung between them when Ruth had given him that letter written by his father.

It was certainly less than ten minutes from the time that Ruth's consent was given to the plan till she found herself in the presence of Hakon's friendly magistrate—a man as sunny as the day itself. He was no less florid in his cheer and good-nature than he was as to countenance. He had laughing eyes as well, and a smiling mouth. He was so thoroughly delighted to behold John Hakon, to whom he owed almost life itself, that he scarcely knew how to contain his glee.

He was introduced to Ruth as William Moody. Hakon likewise stated frankly the nature of their errand and the necessity for keeping the matter strictly secret. To this Judge Moody agreed in a spirit of friendliness and gratitude towards Hakon that Ruth could see was thoroughly genuine.

Then the simple ceremony that made the two man and wife, in the cognizance of the law, was presently concluded. At the end of it Moody discreetly turned away, pretending to make an absorbing search for certain papers. In the minds of all three had arisen a thought of the customary wedding salutation.

Hakon and Ruth were, however, embarrassed and almost abashed, now that the spontaneity and impulse, awakened by the sunlight and the power of their love, had hastened them onward to the completion of this deed. A light, almost of alarm, appeared in Ruth's brown eyes, now that she realized how fully, in the purview of the law at least, she belonged to the man who stood before her. But across Hakon's face had crept an expression of asceticism, as if he too rebuked the mad spirit which had led him to propose such an outcome of their ride. Beholding this severity, Ruth was somewhat comforted and assured. She thanked him with a shy, sweet look of maidenhood that for him possessed a beauty ineffable.

He took her hand, and slipping from his finger the ring with which his mother had been wedded, he placed it on hers, in a spirit of reverence and tenderness that affected her profoundly.

Tears abruptly filled her eyes. She held the ring against her lips for a second, and her courage rose to the height of his.

Meantime the magistrate, having opened many drawers in which he knew he should fail to find his blank certificates, came at length, with a well-feigned note of surprise, upon the sheets he sought. One of these he filled in with elaborate care and in his finest chirography.

"There we are," he said, at the end, and he de-

livered the document to Ruth. "Mr. Hakon," he added, "I've said God bless you many a time, and now I hope you and Mrs. Hakon will permit me to say, more earnestly than ever—God bless you both!"

He shook hands first with Ruth then with her husband.

That the radiant sun gave them welcome to the open air again, when they left the dingy office of the magistrate, both Ruth and Hakon felt. They were both tremendously excited—tremendously happy—yet tremendously subdued. William Moody followed them out to the edge of the walk, where he courteously insisted upon placing Ruth in the car. Then the engine purred out its comforting congratulations, and, boasting of its prowess, snatched hold of the gears and spun the machine away along the road.

The hour was now so late that no further exploration of the country roads was possible. Hakon had headed the car for home. Side by side he and Ruth rode excitedly, but with no exchange of a handclasp and with no return to the subject of love. In the breast of either a thousand little fears and compunctions were arising as they thought of the possible consequences of their madness. They talked of politics, of plays, of the Hobarts, and of Breeme—yet into every topic was fused a bright, irrepressible happiness, exultant alike over all reserve and worry.

Back along the homeward route they sped, without incident, and crossed the river once more at the ferry.

It was six o'clock when at length they neared the Hobarts' residence. Then Ruth took off her wedding-ring, and hanging it half guiltily upon a tiny gold chain she wore about her neck, she slipped it into her corsage, where she pressed it in happiness against her heart.

"Of course we can see each other—pretty often?" she said.

"I've got to see you often," he replied. "A man has to breathe to live."

The machine was coming to a halt. Ruth laid her hand ever so lightly on Hakon's arm.

"We belong to each other—forever," she said, in a tremulous whisper of exultation. "And—I love you."

She felt the man's strong frame abruptly trembling. By the fading light she saw the divinity of passion burning in his eyes. But he made no reply. And Ruth, who had felt him quivering, required no mere verbal reiteration of his love. She knew.

The car had been halted for nearly half a minute before Hakon stepped down from his seat and assisted her to alight.

Ruth leaned her weight for one brief, ecstatic second on his arm.

"Good-bye," she said.

And Hakon answered only, "Good-bye."

XIX

IN the calm which a night of rest had given him, after the final subsidence of excitements incident to all that had happened, Hakon walked not only to his office the following morning, but past the building, down Fifth Avenue, bathed in brilliant sunlight, to Washington Square. The balminess of spring was becoming the promise of summer; all out-doors was none too large for his mood.

Beyond the old-fashioned, stately houses, with which the avenue begins its unique features, the Washington arch towered whitely, its chaste beauty heightened by the delicate greens of newly aspiring trees beyond, with which the square was richly endowed.

On the benches that lined all the pathways of the place, hundreds of people—men, women, and children—were sunning themselves contentedly. Tots, totlets, and toddlers, with larger boys and girls by the score, were romping on the seamed asphalt of the winding paths. The fountain was lightly plashing in its pool. About it, in the newly crumbled earth, countless spears of green, where tulips and crocuses were lifting in sun-worship, bristled stiffly from the mould. A flock of sparrows, scolding, hopping briskly about, and darting here and there like brown-feathered bullets, afforded infinite amusement to a tiny bit of boyish humanity who tried to strike them with a long piece of twine.

Amused at his antics, Hakon stood by the fountain watching. Then at length he passed along, as pleased as a boy himself with the sunlight, the ever-moving groups of multicolored caps and coats that bedecked the youngsters, and, in fact, with all the world.

But the tongues he heard were foreign. They were nearly all Italian women and Italian children that occupied the once aristocratic quarter. On the down-town side of the square the sordid, seamy side of life is unrelieved. On the up-town side old-fashioned grandeur still maintains its dignity. The small park, in its beauty, marks the division between squalor and refinement, toil and ease, the yet unassimilated immigrant and the oldest American generations.

Towards a particularly large swarm of children Hakon made his way. Some man, he could see, was doling out pea-nuts from his pocket, which appeared to hold a supply practically inexhaustible. The man's back was turned. He was evidently enjoying himself very much, indeed, as he struggled against various phases of childish cupidity that prompted the strong to overwhelm the weak; and Hakon drew nearer, much entertained by the spectacle.

For nearly five minutes the play continued. Then that pocket was finally emptied. Its owner dusted off his hands, the children became less aggressive, and the man turned his head.

It was Breeme. His eye caught Hakon's, a light of recognition burst upon his smooth, round face, and he left his seat at once.

"Why, hello, old man," said he. "I was just thinking of walking up to your office. Isn't this morning simply apple-blossoms and cream?"

"How are you?" answered Hakon, as they shook hands and started towards the avenue. "I see you are out already after votes."

"Oh, I've got to have the kids' votes, sure," agreed Breeme, with a grin. "It's better to be elected Santa Claus by a pack of Dago urchins than pound-master by a lot of political goats. I'd hate to be a pound-master—or a cab-driver at a Chinese funeral on a rainy day. How are things?"

"Quiet," responded Hakon. "You're not disgusted afresh with politics so soon? You haven't already joined the pirates and been tattooed with a jolly roger on your breast?"

"I've thrown out a line—and I think I've got a bite," said Breeme, one of whose charms was the delightful frequency with which he changed his metaphor. "But you never can tell till you pull up your hook, whether you've got a shark or an old tomato-can. Some ways it might be surer to go back to practising law."

"Or skinning cats," supplemented Hakon, who knew that his friend had begun his financial career, as a boy, by despoiling a very domestic creature of its pelt. "You may, however, prefer to skin a tiger."

"You leave it to me," said Breeme. "Skin them from the inside—that's the safest plan. If they object, you don't get scratched or hurt. But, tell me, what are you doing? I have seen a great deal in the papers recently about you bobbing up at the national convention as a dark horse. I've seen it particularly in the papers from outside cities. Is the wave of feeling, the undercurrent, so to speak, gently sloshing along the inland shores?"

Hakon said: "I hope so." He added: "Were you coming up to see me for anything particular?"

"No," answered Breeme. "Just to talk things over. By-the-way, though, I heard a new story of Graystone."

"Graystone?" echoed Hakon.

"Yes. Don't you remember, I mentioned his name the last time I was in? He's one of the craftiest wolves of the Street. He's got partners in all sorts of deals. Well, a fellow-grafter invited him and his crowd to join in a pool and bull the coffee market for a haul. The fellow made it look all right. They all came in, Graystone's uncle and a partner with the rest. They started the movement and got it going, and prices went up—then the chap who had worked up the scheme began to feed out the coffee to his associates. He had thousands of bags of it and fixed up the game to get rid of the load. He dumped every sack, and down went the figures. Old Graystone found out where all that coffee was coming from, and knew he was caught. So he got out from under—took his losses. Then, after he had broken the market completely by throwing over his own contracts, he calmly went to his partner and his uncle and told them to wriggle out from beneath the tottered ruins. He didn't give them a show on earth, in other words, but protected himself first, by a few paltry points, instead of giving them an even chance to save their money, and his uncle lost twenty-five thousand dollars and is ruined. Why, that old octopus would eat his own brother's last dollar, with maple sirup, if he thought it would help his digestion. He wouldn't stop at anything on earth."

"No," said Hakon, "I don't suppose he would."

"You ought to know him," added Breeme.

"Any better than I do—after all you've told me?"

and Hakon shook his head. "It wouldn't be pleasant."

They had walked up the avenue and were almost come to the building in which Hakon had his office.

"And there's one more thing I wanted to tell you," Breeme volunteered. "Roberts, that reporter, is almost sure that our friend, Judge Wright, who tried Charley Oluff, and let him off with a fine, was sweetened by the gang at Oluff's back. Some one went to Wright's, at Laconia Park, the night before the sentence was pronounced, in a big red automobile. And that's probably when the job was done. Well, I won't go up to your office now. So long. Be good and you'll be eccentric."

That parting bit of information delivered by Breeme concerning the bribing of the judge who lived at Laconia Park destroyed the simple, spontaneous joy that Hakon had taken in his walk. It gave him an illness of the mind that not even the memory of all that passed between himself and Ruth the day before could wholly obliterate. If Ruth should ever learn of that loathsome affair, into which Amos Graystone had forced him, she must needs turn from him with disgust. It stirred anew the banked fires of hatred and anger which burned within him whensoever he thought of Graystone and his associates.

It was quite on a par with the utterly despicable injury they had wrought by that alteration of his father's letter five years before. As he thought of all this an undying anger was rooted in his being. He was intensely glad, however, to think he was married to Ruth. He suddenly resolved that this fact should some day pay Graystone back for all he had done.

On the floor of his office were a number of letters

when he opened the door and entered. One was from Clara, who had promised herself, and now promised him, that every time an evening passed and he did not come, she would write him a line to assure him of her constancy. Two of the letters came from old-time friends, who, having watched his irresistible on-march towards the presidential nomination, wrote to extend their heart-felt congratulations. With singular unanimity both writers were convinced that the cause of right would have a trusted champion once more, and that from any of John Hakon's strongholds, as from every act of his administration—if it came to that—organized wrong must flee to save its very substance.

Hakon was the better enabled to endure these expressions of faith in his integrity since he had made up his mind to endure almost any personal sacrifice for the sake of finally beating Amos Graystone and his cohort of rogues in syndicate.

The fourth of his letters was addressed in a hand which he did not know. The fifth was from Ruth. He reserved that till the last. Tearing open the envelope from the unknown correspondent, he glanced at the bottom of the brief communication. The name subscribed was "Bertha Meshe." Her note said:

"Gray wishes you to come this evening to the Orange Parlor, —— Hotel, for a little consultation. Say at half-past eight. Time is short and every day important."

Hakon's annoyance was promptly uppermost in his thoughts. Nevertheless, remembering his resolve to do anything and everything that Graystone might now require—the better to mask his intentions in the game—he nodded consent to the summons.

Then he opened the tiny note from Ruth. It contained but one line, which read:

" Pretty often—don't forget."

This bit of paper the man held longingly against his lips.

XX

THREE times that afternoon Hakon started to leave his office and go to Ruth. Three times, because of the very cogency of the impulse, he denied himself the happiness that he knew to be dangerous. The way for him to resist temptations was to remain away from the paradise they created.

He wrote her a note as brief as her own, and as poignant. This he carried in his hand to a florist's, and had it sent with a cluster of dark-red roses, only less beautiful, to him, than Ruth herself.

He returned to his desk when this was done, and forced himself to work. To have his mind in the turmoil consequent upon thinking of Ruth in one breath and Graystone in the next was anything but sanity. He must grasp control, not alone for his immediate self-preservation, but also for his better mental equipment in the coming interview with his chief. He had been no match for Graystone up to the present—at least not until his unpremeditated marriage with Ruth. Now that the thing had been done that annulled all Graystone's plans for a wedding with Clara, there was fear of detection to sharpen his wits, and need for cunning to meet the craft with which all the Graystone moves were made.

Such a tingling of joy as Hakon experienced, when he contemplated the completeness of his counter-

move to spike the Graystone guns, was sufficient to burnish wits much more dull than his own. He felt himself at last on something of a footing with the man who had tricked and entrapped him. He felt far more worthy, in his own estimation, than he had for days. He was glad of all he had done and of all he meant to do. He was fighting fire with fire; and it roused the old spirit within him, for the work was fraught with peril. He felt more than merely justified in this thwarting of Graystone's dearest wish, since the man had not only inflicted heartless cruelties upon him in the past, but he had since added disgrace, and now was forcing upon him a loveless marriage which bore upon nothing but private lust for Clara's eminence. Chiefly, however, Hakon rejoiced in the thought of all that it meant to Ruth and himself. At least he had saved that much happiness from the ruins, come what might. And if Graystone writhed when he learned the truth, if it baffled him, enraged him, hurt his pride—so much greater the total of the triumph and the punishment. The one regret Hakon felt in it all arose from a thought of Clara, towards whom he was somewhat sympathetic.

These and a thousand other thoughts, equally distracting, blurred the pages of notes and manuscript at which Hakon stared, in his dogged determination to work, until the hour for his leaving arrived. He had scribbled on blank sheets of paper in his effort to work, and certain lines of reasoning in one of his literary arguments he had followed out with clarity of logic, yet never for more than fifteen minutes at a time had he found himself enabled to focus on his subject. He was glad when he knew it was time to leave.

Nevertheless, a mere stroll up the avenue, then a

slow, quiet service at his dinner, diverted his meditations but a brief time only. While not engaged in thinking of Ruth he was wondering what manner of business it could be that induced Amos Graystone to make this evening's appointment at a place almost public.

When at length he entered the semi-private hotel mentioned in the note, he looked about him with a momentary interest in its scenes. It was a place he knew—now remodelled and renamed—at which he had once been domiciled while remaining for a week in New York. He therefore knew his way.

Having made his way to the Orange Parlor deliberately, he entered the apartment with senses far more quickened than his outward demeanor would have advertised. He looked quickly about. The place was apparently deserted. Then, in the farthest corner, where privacy was made not only possible but inviting, through a medium of screens and pillars, he beheld a newspaper held in an attitude that he fancied was Graystone's.

He approached within fifteen feet before his noise of coughing produced the slightest effect on the figure hidden so peculiarly. Then the paper came down, revealing the languorous eyes and the handsome face of Bertha Meshe.

She smiled with obvious pleasure at beholding Hakon actually come.

"I've been waiting for fifteen minutes. Gray isn't here," she said. That "Gray" had no intention of coming, and was not, indeed, aware that a meeting was arranged, she had no intention of permitting Hakon to ascertain. "Sit down," she added, making room in her corner. "We needn't be unhappy if he keeps us waiting."

"Why should he wish to come here?" inquired Hakon, coldly.

He was not at all pleased by this meeting. Mrs. Meshe was dressed too richly for any occasion of business; her gown was cut too low in the neck; the film across her otherwise bare shoulders was needlessly diaphanous; the jewels she wore, and the daring lights in her eyes, suggested anything but serious affairs of politics. Hakon, however, took the only seat provided in addition to her own.

"Why did Gray insist upon our meeting here?" she replied. "Oh, who could tell? Old men are likely to do anything that's foolish. Don't you think so yourself?"

Hakon had no intention of betraying himself into indiscretions. He was well aware of the danger of making criticisms of a man in the presence of a woman enjoying Mrs. Meshe's relationship.

"I do not always judge prematurely," he answered.

She had moved adroitly to a position from which, by pretending to fuss at her dress, she could push the button of a bell. She pushed it now.

"But you know he *is* getting old," she insisted, looking at Hakon with gleams of red in her slumberous eyes and a smile upon her sensuous mouth. "Of course he's getting old. I tell him so frankly." She sighed. "I wish—I wish he was as young—and strong as you."

Hakon refused to understand her meaning.

"I wish he'd come," he said. "He's strong enough for that."

A light step on the carpet caused him to turn. He saw a servant of the house rapidly approaching, a tray in his hand whereon were three glasses and a bottle of wine. The man placed the tray on a

tabouret. The wine — champagne — he started to open.

"Why—" said Mrs. Meshe, in well-feigned astonishment, "was this ordered by Mr. —— Did you have instructions to bring this here?"

"Yes, madam," replied the man. He coaxed the cork from the bottle under cover of a linen serviette, filled two of the three glasses, and retired.

Hakon was scowling.

"Well," said Mrs. Meshe, who had arranged all the details of the episode an hour before, "if this isn't typical of Gray! I hope the wine won't spoil while we're waiting." And again she pushed that button.

"Graystone needn't have been so thoughtful on my account," said Hakon. "I never mix business and wine."

"That is the way to make one wish the business might be kept waiting," Mrs. Meshe replied. "I hate business at night."

As if in response to her wishes, a second of the servants now appeared, bringing a telegram, which he promptly delivered. She tore it open and read it hurriedly. "No answer," she said, and the servant departed.

"There can be no excuse for letting the wine be spoiled after this," she announced, "for Gray has wired he cannot come."

The telegram, like the bottle, had been planned by herself.

"It strikes me," answered Hakon, dryly, "that the meeting is adjourned."

"Not at all," said his clever companion, meeting the unexpected turn he was giving to affairs. "There is a great deal that Gray wished me to tell you under

any circumstances." She leaned back and looked at him invitingly, her bold beauty heightened by the color that was warming her face. Her bosom was rising and falling rapidly with her breathing, so like a fine animal's. "Don't let's waste good champagne," she added. "Do take a little, for I've got to tell you that we are having very hard work to secure the secret pledges of some of your delegations. I want all the suggestions you can give me, to help. Let's take just a sip, for the sake of our wits."

Hakon's displeasure was not to be abated. He would never have traded with a woman as he had done with Graystone; he did not propose to discuss his affairs with her now. As a matter of fact, she had lured him here for no political reasons at all, but simply because he had attracted her and piqued her, first with his manifest strength, second with his coldness, his blindness to her charms.

"I have no suggestions to give," he told her, bluntly. "I have left all that part of the—work—to Graystone's ingenuity. It is all quite out of my line."

She felt the sting in his intimation; nevertheless, the argument was serving to keep him here and arouse his interest, and that was something. He refused to drink; she therefore neglected the wine herself—and thirsted.

"Graystone," she said. "Yes, I suppose he will get all the credit, when the goods are delivered. That's the way of the world," and she smiled at him with an air of sadness. "Graystone never counts the killed and wounded, and neither does any one else."

Hakon, who was proof against her sensuous graces, while boldly unmasked, was vulnerable through his

sympathies. He felt a genuine pity for the woman, who had voiced perhaps despair, he thought, for he knew to what lengths Amos Graystone would sacrifice his tools, of which this woman was one. Yet he dared not too far agree with her mood. What her object was he had not guessed. He more than half suspected she was sounding him, entirely in the interests of Graystone and for Graystone's information.

"You yourself would certainly give him much of the credit," he said. "It could hardly be denied."

"Oh, he'll *take* all the credit, fast enough," rejoined Mrs. Meshe. "He'll insist on having the price."

Hakon's change of color did not escape the keen, if languorous, eyes fixed in fascination on his face. He glanced up, saw the look she gave him, and frowned.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" she repeated. "I was wondering which of us two is more to be consoled, you or myself—both in Graystone's hands. Of course you— If Clara had brains—if she had even beautiful arms—or eyes—"

Her own magnificent arms, her own magnetic eyes were working some madness in Hakon's being. But he flung it off.

"Well?" he demanded, almost savagely, angered to think she knew of his supposed relationship with Graystone's daughter. "Well?"

"Oh—nothing," answered Mrs. Meshe, smiling again as if in melancholy. "Only—look at that wine—its life bubbling up to the top, to perish. It's good wine being wasted. And Gray wouldn't care if he wasted a man—the same way. And to waste one—on Clara!"

Hakon was beginning to fear, as well as to hate,

this creature whose every accent, glance, and gesture threatened ravishment to his senses. He could feel some baneful, deadly influence emanating from her presence. He could not have been a man and failed to respond to her purely animal power.

"I didn't come here to talk of Miss Graystone," he blurted. "What can she have to do with any business that made this meeting necessary?"

"Not very much, except—that you don't love her," answered Mrs. Meshe, daringly.

Hakon's face reddened and paled. His gaze was fastened on Mrs. Meshe's eyes for a moment, as if she held him in a strange fascination. How much she might know, or how much she might have guessed, he could not determine. She was diabolically clever; she was obviously sure of her position. For a moment he feared she had someway managed to come upon the secret of his marriage to Ruth.

His well-concealed agitation was somewhat revealed to Mrs. Meshe. She knew nothing, except that a man of his attainments could not, by any possibility, love Clara Graystone with a prospective bridegroom's devotion, or warmth. That her shot had gone home she readily discerned. She could not forbear to level her weapon again.

"You couldn't love a brainless, scrawny woman," she added. "Now, could you?"

The look in her eyes was hard to escape. It was terrible, as fire is terrible—destructive and yet, in a way, magnificent. It excited Hakon physically, but it certainly repelled him in every other way.

"I must absolutely refuse to discuss Miss Graystone with any other—with any one," he said. "That matter is settled."

In the light of events, he felt a very distinct sym-

pathy with Clara Graystone, who was honest, he thought, even if shallow, and who—with such a father and such acquaintances as he doubtless gave her—was loved by no one whom Hakon could imagine. He felt himself despicable, strive as he might to think of his right to punish Graystone and to fight for his own preservation.

"I don't care to discuss her either," replied Mrs. Meshe. "She isn't so very attractive, even as a topic." Then, as if she caught at some half-tangible thought, fresh from Hakon's brain, she added, oddly: "It's settled, of course, as you say, but Graystone is growing uneasy. He hates to take any chances, so he asked me what I thought of having you and Clara married clandestinely, before the convention—right away. He seems to think it would make you keener for the fight, and more like a son."

Hakon turned white in a newer way. A hard, brilliant gleam was in his eyes. Had the man been suddenly cornered he could not have appeared more ready for violent conflict. He could not know that the woman before him had fabricated such a suggestion on the spur of the moment; he could not escape the apprehension which the thought of such a dénouement compelled.

He demanded, hoarsely: "What did you say to—to such a plan?"

Mrs. Meshe recognized her advantage instantly. Her thought had been an inspiration.

"I told him it would be a fatal blunder," she answered, slowly, leaning slightly towards Hakon and looking at him with an abandon such as he had never before beheld. "Was that the answer of—a friend?"

"It—was the— What did he say?" Hakon fal-

tered, before he could guard against his impulse to know all he could, and at once.

"He disputed the point with me—as he always does," she replied, inventing her story as she went along. "It still remains unsettled whether he will have such a wedding or not. We are to talk it all over again to-morrow morning."

"Was he coming here to talk it over to-night?" said Hakon.

"Gray?" she asked, archly. "You don't know him yet. He's afraid, sometimes, of the ears in the paving-blocks themselves. No; he and I are to talk the matter over by ourselves." She paused for a moment, then leaning even farther towards Hakon, laid her hand on his arm. "Do you want me to be your friend?" she said.

Hakon felt that the contact of her fingers burned, even through the sleeve of his coat. He was fascinated despite all he could do. But he withdrew his arm, nevertheless, artfully, as if in a natural gesture.

"I hope Graystone will have better sense than to insist upon this," he answered, betrayed into the incautious speech by disturbed meditations. "The—secret would be hard to keep."

"I'll tell him that, and use a number of other arguments that will make an impression—if you wish," she told him, her voice a caress, as she spoke. "What do you say?"

Hakon took out his watch and looked at it sharply. The subterfuge was merely to gain a breathing-spell of half a moment.

"I ought to have been away from here half an hour ago," he said, as if in recollection of an engagement.

Mrs. Meshe beheld him wavering.

"Perhaps I'm interfering," she said, insidiously. "Perhaps you are very fond of Clara, after all." In a moment she added: "I sha'n't discuss it and wrangle with Gray—unless you wish me to do so."

Hakon still stared at his watch. Looking up he beheld her slumberous eyes upon his face. "Well," he said, bluntly, "and what would be the price?"

"Price?" she echoed. "My price? Why — no price at all. Just friendship." In a lower voice she said: "That isn't much to ask; do you think it is?"

Hakon arose. Mrs. Meshe leaned farther back in the cushions of her seat, her pose now as languorous as her eyes. She watched him narrowly.

"I don't know," he answered.

"Do your neighbors know?" she demanded, softly, with a musical laugh. "Come, I'll do all I can, for I know we are going to be friends. When shall I see you and tell you results?" She arose and stood looking at him warmly, all her fascinations subtly playing.

Again Hakon said: "I don't know. . . . I've got to be starting along."

"I'll send you word when to see me again," she told him, aware of the folly of pushing her point too far, just as she had seen the mistake of too much insistence on the wine. "Shall we say good-night?" and she held out her hand.

Hakon took it, partially because he had never in his life refused to shake hands with any one. But the clasp she gave him brought a blush to his cheek.

"Good-night," he said, and he strode at once from the room.

Mrs. Meshe watched him go. A smile was on her face. Then she poured out a fresh glass of wine from the bottle, and sitting down sipped it with avidity.

XXI

MRS. MESHE not only had no conversation whatsoever with Graystone on the morning ensuing, but, on the contrary, left the town by an early train for Philadelphia, where the presence of a large sum of money at a conference with certain of the forces back of Graystone's latest political manœuvre was imperative. The secret work necessary to nominate John Hakon at the coming national convention had progressed to a point where the greatest trouble lay in preventing newly purchased delegates from talking. The Graystone forces were quite well aware that one of the secrets of success in any business is silence. In this present hidden current of power there had hardly been more than a hint of Hakon's real strength, and there had been but little work revealed to disturb the calm assurance of Brevoort and his friends. There were now a number of weeks remaining, not a moment of which would be lost by the scores of "lawyers" employed in behalf of the Graystone interests.

Hakon, for his part, had passed a wretched night. Mrs. Meshe had succeeded not only in alarming him as to Graystone's intentions with respect to Clara, but also concerning her own machinations. He was back at his office, again attempting to pacify his mind with labor. By a mere coincidence he turned up his notes from the histories of Rome and Egypt,

one after the other, and in each instance found himself staring at a paragraph relating to destruction wrought to men and empires through the agency of women.

Like writing on the wall these paragraphs appeared. History, repeated times without end, sounded ancient warnings from the dulness of paper itself, and in tones more tremendous than those of a bell. Women it had been who worked, and women it would be, when the state grew rotten, that would work again the final madness that ends alone in destruction. But through men it would come, as it always had. Men afraid of loss, they would be—men afraid to lose a handful of gold, a wreath of artificial laurel, a cupful of wine, or a woman's smile—men like Graystone—and himself.

Shame had been a frequent visitor in Hakon's thoughts. It came again to-day. He belittled himself because of his fear of Mrs. Meshe. He scorned himself because he had not the strength, after all he had seen, to end the whole miserable business. The one way to free himself from Mrs. Meshe, with her dangerous wiles, was to cease the play—repudiate the entire bargain and snatch back his freedom and cleanliness. Having gone so far as he had, however, this was a measure too drastic for his frame of mind. Having resolved to best the enemy in their abominable traffic, by their own dark methods, he was hardly in a mood to relinquish everything this morning. And always there was Ruth, whose wish to see him president had borne down his balance before.

Mrs. Meshe, nevertheless, was an apparition of menace in his mental speculations. Her overtures of "friendship" added an element to the situation

on which he could not have counted. He knew how dangerous would be the ground whereon he stood should this woman's wrath descend upon him. To scorn her advances would be simply to invite her fury. To accept her friendship could result in one thing only — disaster. That Ruth might one day learn of all this underground grovelling, and that Graystone would be equally certain to come upon anything dubious—these were but primary causes for new apprehension.

Meantime, Ruth was becoming more and more precious to his soul with every passing hour. Likewise certain duties, in the direction of Clara Graystone, were not to be avoided. The last was the most sickening thought of them all; to deceive a woman, even so shallow a woman as Clara, was contemptible, as Hakon had told himself repeatedly. He despised himself for this unworthy bit of trickery more than for anything else he was doing. A thousand times he wished he had never dreamed of this presidential insanity, and a thousand times he retracted his wish, as he suddenly remembered how it came about that he and Ruth had met. It was the presidential rumors that had brought Breeme around, that fateful day, with tickets to the play in his possession. There was no use in wishing; there was one thing only to do—fight it out!

The morning dragged out a length interminable. Hakon was hoping for something to happen—anything that might supply activity or a change of thought. It was maddening to sit here, day after day, and not even know what his "forces" were doing towards his nomination—to have all the work conducted by creatures alien to his knowledge, and, doubtless, in ways he himself might never sanction.

He was caged here in this four-walled office. He wanted to leave it, get out in the open, yet here alone he could keep a little in touch with things; and here, at any moment, important messages might arrive.

It was nearly one o'clock when at last the postman brought a characteristic note from Ruth. She wrote:

"Come up this afternoon and see some friends—and me."

He went. The friends were three young men and four young women—the latter of whom were obliged to content themselves with such entertainment as Mrs. Hobart could supply. The three young men were acting like spokes, with Ruth as the centre to which they were attached.

To Hakon it seemed as if three young fellows, groomed and modern, must of necessity make himself look old and somewhat dingy. Nevertheless, Ruth came forward from the group to greet him, with never so much as a slight attempt at provoking his jealousy.

"You came the last—you must remain till the last," she told him, prettily. "The roses made me very happy."

Then she led him forward to be introduced, saying, as she went: "Do say some of your clever things to the girls. Be real charming to them, please."

It afforded Hakon a genuine pleasure to meet Mrs. Hobart anew. She was quite delightful. Of the three young women, two were students of art, inseparable companions, and both musical.

Mrs. Hobart remarked that Mr. Hakon, as she had heard from Mr. Breeme, had an exceeding fine taste in pictures. Thereupon the two young women,

devoted to their studies, girlishly coaxed him into a dissertation on the canons of their craft — a mild, witty lecture, before he had finished, instructive, amusing, and enlarging to the views of all.

Ruth had been captured, as before, by the three young spokes, who must needs revolve about her so attentively. Nevertheless, as Hakon talked, she gravitated nearer and nearer to his seat, escorted by her company, who were presently included in the audience that listened.

It was one of Hakon's hours. Mysterious stimulants to wit come to every man, particularly to him who has long been self-centred and preoccupied within some narrow circle. Such a stimulant to Hakon, Ruth had supplied before. This afternoon her greeting and her simple request that he make himself pleasant to the company had proved sufficient to ignite his brighter self; and now she was amply repaid as she witnessed the scintillating magnetism of his personality. She loved him the more for the very fact that the three young women, in addition to Mrs. Hobart, found him charming. A tingling of excited anticipation, as she thought of what he would do as President of the United States, brought a marvellous brilliance to her deep-brown eyes and a glow of beauty's color to her cheeks.

When the others were gone, and Ruth and Mrs. Hobart had walked with the group to the door that led to the hall, the hostess laid her hand caressingly on Ruth's shoulder.

"Look out, my dear," she said, in mock warning, "you might get fond of Mr. Hakon."

Ruth blushed, and mischief flashed in her glance.

"I believe I might," she answered. "You let me go back alone and I'll tell him so."

"What a girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Hobart. "I shall have to make my excuses."

This she did. Then Ruth, whose one sweet impulse was to throw her arms about Hakon's neck and kiss him in rapture, sat down and took it out in one long look instead.

And meeting her look, Hakon felt the wine within him rise to overwhelm his senses. He gripped the arms of his chair, however, and remained where he was. True to her word to Mrs. Hobart, Ruth said to him presently:

"You are making me fonder and fonder of you every hour."

"And what is happening to me, in the mean time?" he inquired, with an almost boyish brightness in his eyes.

"Why, I don't know," she answered. "What?"

"I'd be afraid to tell myself, out loud," he confessed. "And you don't—regret anything, I hope."

"I'm glad of every moment we've ever spent together," she answered, passionately. "The last day was the most precious moment of all. I am very foolish. I wish every day to linger, and yet I want them all to hurry by—at least till—well, just till—later on." She wanted to say "till after election," when their secret could be told, but she felt she had said too much as it was.

He looked at her steadily. It was the greatest pleasure he had ever known, just to sit here and look upon her face, by the right of what had been done between them.

He said: "Sometimes it almost seems as if I could give up everything, and tell our secret to the world before next November."

"And you really would *have* to give up everything, if you told?" she inquired.

"Everything—everything but you."

"Don't you breathe a word then. Don't you give up anything," she commanded, warmly. "Whatever it is, or *who*ever it is—don't you let it beat. They can't take away that day of ours, anyway."

"Nor love," he added.

She gave a little cry of happiness and started from her seat, to throw herself down on her knees and put her head upon his breast. But instead she halted, then ran down the length of the room, and walked slowly back again, pressing her hands against the ring that lay upon her heart.

"I'm crazily happy," she said, blushing rosily. "Don't mind what I do."

If her impulse to snatch a token of love was strong, Hakon's was far more powerful. His nature had been dormant far longer, and now it was thoroughly aroused, only to find itself imprisoned. But repression was his habit, and he held himself in a grip of iron rigidity.

"I mustn't come too frequently," he said. "I think I'd better be starting along." He rose from his seat and stood there looking upon her.

"Not for just another minute," she begged. "Just stay another little minute, and we won't say a word —just sit here quietly, and be happy."

He laughed—the first time she had ever heard him utter such a sound. His faint smile was a rare and beautiful thing to see, and this was equally beautiful to hear.

"You are a siren," he said, "and the tide is rising."

"I can't swim—or I won't swim," she retorted,

brightly. "You are never going to get drowned unless I'm drowned by your side."

She had started to speak half in jest; she ended wholly in earnest. Her face had become sweetly grave.

"I mean that," she said, "every word."

It was just such a spirit as her mother once had shown to John Hakon when he was merely a boy. Now it was infinitely more precious to his heart; indeed, it was absolutely priceless.

"Ruth," he said. "Ruth."

He swayed where he stood. How he restrained his hands, his arms, he could not have told.

She helped him, in that moment, for sublimity had come upon her passion when she realized how hard she was making it for Hakon to respect her own edict, that the secret must be kept from her hands and her lips.

"I'm glad we're such friends—with it all," she said, after a moment of silence. "And, by-the-way, I've received some tickets for a loan exhibition of pictures. Will you take me, and tell me all about the bad ones?"

"Yes," he said, and he added, dryly: "But it may require a great deal of talking. Now I'm going. . . . Good-bye."

He denied himself even a hand-shake. Ruth let him go without it, aching as her fingers were for just one little pressure.

"Good-bye," she said at the door. "I hope there will be lots of bad pictures. I like to hear you say—almost anything."

XXII

THREE days had gone and there had been no sign from Mrs. Meshe and none from Graystone. Hakon was growing uneasy. He preferred to know there were actual dangers than to try to conjecture what menaces might be hidden by silence.

He had seen Ruth but once since that last afternoon; he had called on Clara twice, on one occasion meeting her returned old-time admirer, whose visits to Graystone's were becoming more and more frequent.

The tickets to the art exhibition, which Ruth had mentioned, were now on Hakon's desk. She had sent them lest he overlook the date. To-morrow evening was the time for which they called.

On returning from a luncheon, which he had taken more to satisfy the need within him for diversion than because of any hunger, he found Walter Breeme seated in the window of the hall next to his office, where he had been for nearly an hour, patiently awaiting Hakon's return.

He greeted his friend with his customary fervor.

"Say," said he, "you must have been eating canary's tongues, one at a time. Don't cultivate a gilded appetite. Feed on sensations—American's quick lunch, warranted to fill any tank, in a hurry. Say, I've got something to show you, Hakon. That's why I came."

"Come in," said Hakon. "It makes me feel better to see you already. You're getting fatter. I suppose you've commenced 'eating things from the inside.'"

"I've got some inside facts, and you will be the man to use them," answered Breeme. "When you get to be president, old man, you ought to be the hottest substance ever put in the salad. And I know you are going to get that nomination. Roberts thinks so himself. He'd give a hundred dollars for an interview, and when you get ready I wish you'd give him a chance. To-day I've brought along a few original telegrams, secured by Roberts, and never before submitted to any one but you and me. Here you are. Just take a look at these."

He took from his wallet a small bundle of light yellow documents, banded together with a rubber strap. Then he drew a chair to Hakon's desk.

"Sit down here beside me," he said, "these are worth seeing. I only wish Roberts were here to tell you exactly what they mean. He told me, but all very hurriedly, and I don't remember details anyway. Now the cards in this little poker hand," he explained, extracting five telegrams, pinned together, from his collection, "were sent by the archangel of things political—now dead—in a large town south of here, and they all concern a lot of sugar jobbery at Washington and the wrecking of a bank that handled money for the people."

He spread out number one of his exhibits. It was addressed to the president of a bank in the large city he had mentioned. It read:

"Your letter received. Am all balled up in this market and cannot do it. Shall I wire —— to help you?"

The name signed at the bottom opened Hakon's eyes. In the left-hand corner of the telegraphic form was written "D. H." and a number, somewhat under nine thousand.

"That was sent when the angel was asked to help," explained Breeme. "He was at Washington, boiling the sugar. You can see that some one's prayer to the angel had been heard but could not be granted. Here's another, sent likewise from the national cook-house."

Hakon saw that it had been sent to some one in Pennsylvania. He read:

"Tell —— to ascertain whether —— has any paper in the —— bank, and if so whether his collateral is safe."

This was signed by the same hand that had signed the former paper. Indeed, all five of these originals had been sent from the same source. At the bottom, as before, appeared the cabalistic "D. H." with its number.

"See that?" inquired Breeme, pointing out this sign. "That is the number of the angel's franking privilege. He never pays to send these messages. Here's another."

This third one was addressed in care of still another bank.

"Have you covered all my shorts? There is nothing here to improve the situation."

"From Washington," commented Breeme. "Sent at eight twenty-five in the morning. Angels get up early when the sugar's on the fire. Listen to this one," and he read the fourth:

"Yours received. Send me check for velvet. Buy fifty thousand at thirty-four. There is no support."

This had gone to the same bank address to which the one before had been sent.

"Look at that velvet! That's the dough—the profits," said Breeme. "And here is the last one by our winged friend."

"I sincerely trust that at the next meeting of the board you will elect W——."

"Say, and W—— was elected," added Breeme. "But you'll have to get the significant facts to which these relate from Roberts."

He folded up the telegrams and laid them aside.

"These," he said, uncreasing four different documents—"these are prettier. They're easier to follow. They all came from a United States senator at Washington and are all addressed to law-makers at Albany. How is this?"

He spread out a type-written telegram, addressed to a member of the assembly at Albany, as he had said. At the top, pasted fairly in the centre of the ordinary Western Union form, was a large green stamp, on which was printed the date, 1898, and the word "Frank," in large letters, in addition to the telegraph company's name and the signature of the president, in miniature. Beneath the word "Frank" appeared "No." And then, in red ink, a designation consisting of one letter and one numerical figure. The message was brief:

"Am inclined to think Senate bill two hundred and thirty, relative to druggists' clerks, should be held up in assembly."

This was signed with the name of one of the most notorious politicians the country has ever known. There were three more, sent by the same hand, all

from Washington, each with the same green stamp upon its face. Two were addressed to one of the prominent and trusted reformers of that memorable year at the senate chamber p the Hudson.

The first of these, type-written, read:

"Newspapers report you voting against reporting Rapid Transit. Why? Are official influences antagonizing?"

The second contained nineteen words:

"Your telegram to Washington received, which, being interpreted, I infer, that you, for the governor, have beaten bill."

"Funny," said Breeme, "how Washington does like to stir the ladle in the soup up here in New York State all the time. This last one would please a lot of people, old as it is. This is in the old senatorial boss's own handwriting. It was sent to still another senator at Albany."

Hakon read it twice.

"Certain good friends and important interests will be hurt by Ford's Amsterdam Avenue bill. Can you help them?"

"Those 'friends' were railroad swine, putting lard on their haunches by eating up all the New York City street-railway franchises," said Breeme. "They got 'helped' to their heart's content. And that druggists'-clerk bill was a measure to relieve the clerks from overworking by compelling their employers to reduce their hours. It was a measure for the people as much as for the clerks, because a man so stupid from fatigue that he doesn't know prussic acid from soothing sirup doesn't put up safe prescriptions. But what is a sharp political axe ever ground for if it isn't to do any chopping?" He

looked at Hakon's face. "What do you think of the lot?" he inquired.

"What is the use?" answered Hakon, half musing to himself. "The people cannot hope to stand a chance. But what does your friend expect me to do with these?"

"Nothing—just at present," answered Breeme. "I got him to let me have them, just as a sort of encouragement to you, old man. He'll provide you with material, however, when you get ready, and meantime you can know a little of what to expect."

To Hakon, who remembered far more than Breeme could know of past political transactions, these telegrams were significant enough. But he knew of infamies far more recent, far more important to the nation, concerning which he was dumb, perforce—at least for the present.

"You and Roberts are very friendly, to the country as well as to me," he said. "And I shall need—"

A ring at the telephone interrupted his sentence. He took the receiver in his hand at once.

The voice of Amos Graystone came so loudly over the wire that Hakon feared even Breeme must hear it, and guess at the dark alliance between this unpretentious office and the seat of empire down towards the end of Broadway.

"I'll see you to-night, at the house," said the voice. "Come in a cab, at eight."

Hakon answered: "I'll come."

"Appointment for right away?" inquired Breeme. "Don't let me keep you, old chap."

"It isn't for right away," answered Hakon, whose excitement had risen despite his control. "You needn't hurry away."

Breeme was putting up his telegrams. His answer

was halted by the knock of the postman, who opened the door and handed Hakon a letter. Politely laying it aside, unopened, till Breeme should be gone, Hakon stared at it fixedly, baffled to know where and when he had seen that chirography before. Then he suddenly knew the writing. It was Mrs. Meshe's angular scrawl.

Coming as it did, on the very heels of the message from Graystone, it aroused apprehension in his mind without delay. That Mrs. Meshe had held a conference with Graystone, concerning the advisability of a clandestine marriage between Clara and himself, at once, he had no doubt. Moreover, he was certain the summons by Graystone for this evening portended the worst. The request that he come in a cab might even mean that the marriage was planned for to-night. An ooze appeared on his forehead. He could not wait to read this letter.

"Excuse me for a moment, Breeme," he said, "till I see what this is."

He opened the envelope with nerveless fingers.

Mrs. Meshe had been brief. She wrote:

"I have talked the matter over with Gray. Meet me at the Orange room again, to-morrow evening."

He gazed from this to the tickets sent by Ruth. Preoccupied as his senses were, he nevertheless saw the date on those tickets. They, too, demanded attention to-morrow night—and he had promised Ruth he would take her to the exhibition. That something of a crisis might be coming he could have no doubt. If pushed to the wall, there was one thing only to do—die fighting. The death, at the most, would be political, and perhaps almost welcome. He would still be alive to love, and Ruth was his.

Then a memory of Ruth's reiterated longing for political honors to crown his brow abruptly made him ill. Stripped of everything, how would he fare at the hands of love, especially now that he had married Ruth, under pressure of political ambitions in which she, no less than he, had found a warrant for that secret ceremony?

The crisis loomed larger. He was tempted to laugh, loud and wildly. He had undergone other emotions till his capacity to respond had been exhausted. His helplessness now became ludicrous, his tragedies were becoming farcical. He—a mere human insect—to be worth all this fuss, this trickery, this elaborate malice of the Fates.

"Oh, hell!" he said.

"What?" said Breeme. "Who do you want to call up? Were you talking to me?"

Hakon had utterly forgotten the presence of his friend.

"No," he answered. "I beg your pardon. I find—that I will have to leave here soon, that's all." He felt that he needed air and a long, hard walk.

"I was just getting ready to go along, anyhow," said Breeme. "I've got an appointment with a twenty-ton frigate, in the high seas of piracy. Goodbye. Don't forget, when you are ready for an interview, let me get you and Roberts together." He shook Hakon's hand and departed.

XXIII

WHEN Hakon came into Graystone's presence, that evening, he was calm again, and determined upon his course. It was the first time he had seen his pseudo-chief since coming into possession of that letter of his father's, which had supplied him with a weapon of offence. To a certain extent he was still willing to undertake the task of appearing to accept Graystone's conditions, one after another, resolved as he was to bide his hour and then repudiate any or all pre-election promises that he should subsequently find to be incompatible with an honest administration of the office. A pre-convention marriage with Clara, however, was not an acceptable or even a possible proposition. Come what might, he had decided to refuse, absolutely, if Graystone made this demand. That he meant to state good and sufficient reasons, without betraying his secret, was of secondary importance. Nevertheless, he had arrayed many arguments against the advisability of the clandestine marriage suggested by Mrs. Meshe, and he felt assured he could prove their logic and their cogency.

Graystone was smoking and thinking, when Hakon entered his study. He made no show of rising to give welcome to his guest. Inasmuch as his cigar gave him greater pleasure than he felt he could derive from a hand-shake with his prospective son-in-

law, he denied himself the salutation, and appeared even less cordial than on many former occasions.

"Hello, John," he said, caressing the half-burned cigar. "Sit down and try a smoke." He pushed the box of precious weeds on the table towards Hakon's hand.

Hakon took a cigar, lighted it calmly enough, and drew up a chair. He had made up his mind to say as little as possible and to make his answers slowly. He had said "Good-evening" on entering. He waited now for his chief to open the conversation.

Graystone was anything but hurried. He smoked in silence for fully two minutes. Then he slightly shifted in his chair.

"John," he said, "your fight is going well. It's getting easier and easier to make this sort of a fight, every day."

That he meant it was daily becoming easier to bribe men, already pledged to support the other man, for whom they had been chosen, Hakon had more than a mere suspicion. But he went on smoking.

As a matter of fact, Graystone and his forces were working night and day to corrupt whole herds of delegates chosen for the national convention, to defeat Brevoort and to nominate their man. They were sparing nothing, either of money, men, or decency. They were overcoming odds in favor of Brevoort, the power of which had never before been suggested to their minds. They were making way against a tide of tremendous magnitude and power. They were sweating gold, in a toil that they dared not relinquish for an hour; but they were winning their way and stemming the stream that must otherwise have carried Brevoort to success.

Graystone was vividly aware of the difficulties

opposed to his will. It made him, however, all the more determined to win. He had never been defeated when he undertook to put a project through; he was confident now of his ability to force his man for president, not only upon the convention, but as well upon the nation. In his off-hand speech of confidence to Hakon, however, he was feeling for Hakon's mood. Many a man he had known to grow arrogant when success was placed in his hand.

But Hakon had learned his lesson at the best of schools—that of Graystone himself.

He merely answered, "Good," and puffed at his cigar quietly.

Graystone looked up at him piercingly for half a second. Hakon's quiet reception of the news surprised him a trifle.

"I've got more confidence than I had at the start," confessed Graystone. "I don't believe they can beat us now."

Hakon made no response. He was certain it was not for this sort of talk that Graystone had summoned him hither.

"Mrs. Meshe has just returned to town," the older man resumed, holding his cigar at a tantalizing distance from his mouth, as if he thought to make it jealous. "She gave me a few new ideas that are worth considering."

Hakon's heart-beat quickened, despite the calmness he was forcing on himself. It suddenly occurred to his mind that Mrs. Meshe might have deceived him utterly—that she might have prompted Graystone to urge an undelayed marriage with Clara.

"Yes?" he said.

"I've been thinking her ideas over," resumed the host, "for Bertha's a very clever woman."

Hakon said: "I suppose she is."

"Very clever," repeated Graystone, who was furtively watching his guest. "She seems to think you will do us credit."

That his chief more than half suspected that any man who knew Bertha Meshe would desire to know her better—that Graystone had, indeed, conceived a half-jealous suspicion of Hakon and Mrs. Meshe, from a word or an accent spoken by the woman herself—all this Hakon could not have guessed. He thought of nothing but the consultation Mrs. Meshe and Graystone might have had concerning himself and Clara.

"I am going to do my best," he said, in reply to his host's last remark, and the all that he meant was not revealed, even to the shrewd wits of the older man.

"Yes," responded Graystone. "Sure." He had eyed Hakon narrowly, and felt convinced that, as yet, the man was not in the least abashed by the mention of Mrs. Meshe's name. He smoked for a moment in silence. Then he added, as a final test: "You ought to feel pretty grateful to Bertha, John, don't you think?"

"Certainly, as much as I do towards the money she is helping to disburse," answered Hakon. "She is an instrument employed in behalf of my—our success."

"Sure," agreed Graystone, better satisfied than before. He turned, however, and demanded, abruptly, "Have you seen her recently?"

Instinctively Hakon knew better than to betray the meeting into which Mrs. Meshe had entrapped him.

"Yes," he said, in a ready equivocation, "that trip I made with her to Laconia Park was recent."

Graystone pressed the point no further. Hakon was honest—which was why they had taken him up. There was certainly no need to suspect him of friendship with Bertha. This was the one important point for which Amos Graystone had summoned him here to his presence, but inasmuch as he had no wish that Hakon should guess at his motives, he brought out a minor topic without delay.

"By-the-way," said he, "I've changed my mind concerning one arrangement. You and Clara, in this marriage business—let me see, what date was it you had in your mind?"

Hakon was promptly losing his composure. He smoked at his weed with wasteful energy.

"The date was not precisely fixed," he answered. "We agreed on some time in November, after election."

But former agreements meant nothing to Graystone, unless by chance they continued to fit in his plans.

"We'll change that arrangement," he announced. "Have you mentioned the fact to any of your friends that you and Clara are engaged?"

"No," said Hakon, shortly. "It wouldn't be good sense."

"It wouldn't be good politics, you mean," corrected his host. "Don't mix sense and politics. And you can keep on keeping the matter to yourself. The wedding—" and there he halted, while he puffed his neglected cigar back to life and hope.

Hakon waited, uneasy with suspense.

"You won't be married in November," resumed Graystone. "Certain reasons have been presented that make it wiser to wait till a little later on. You may not be married till January, John, and we may

have to put it off till the end of the month, or the first part of February."

Hakon flushed redly, in the tremendous release of his pent-up emotions. With difficulty he remained in his chair. He surrounded himself with clouds of smoke as the only means at command of concealing his agitation. The absence of any reply from his lips struck Graystone as being peculiar.

"Well," he demanded, "what do you say?"

Hakon answered, artfully: "Your reasons must be excellent. I am not in your confidence sufficiently to oppose your wishes."

In the new confidence vouchsafed him by his knowledge of the infamous trickery by which his own father's letter had been made to appear so accusing, he was rapidly becoming a match for even Graystone himself.

"No," said Graystone, whose reasons were concerned entirely with his own intended appointment of Hakon's cabinet, after election. "No—there's no need of having too many people worrying out the problems of the scheme. You can tell Clara that I'm to blame for changing the time. I think she's expecting to see you this evening."

Hakon thought it quite likely. He kept his thought to himself. There was one thing now in his mind, remaining stubbornly, and demanding satisfaction. How far had Mrs. Meshe persuaded this change in Graystone's plan concerning the marriage?

"Did any one but Clara and I and yourself know what date we previously had in mind?" he inquired.

Graystone answered: "No one else even knew you're half-way engaged, except Mrs. Meshe, and she knew nothing of the date from me. Did you tell her anything about it?"

"No, certainly not," said Hakon.

"Then she knows nothing about it," stated Graystone. "I haven't discussed the wedding with Mrs. Meshe, for it's none of her business."

"You haven't—" started Hakon, amazed at Graystone's statement, and almost betrayed into an indiscretion. "I mean—you just intimated that you've told her something about the arrangement."

He had pulled himself up in time, but clumsily. Graystone stared at him aggressively.

"Yes, I did just say I'd told Mrs. Meshe about the engagement," he answered. "But is that any reason why I'd go on mulling the matter over with her? It's no concern of hers, and she knows it. She has never spoken of it since. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Nothing," said Hakon. "I thought she knew more about it, that's all. I'm glad she doesn't. The fewer people who know—especially women—the easier the secret will be to preserve."

"Did she ask you anything about it that night you took her up-country?" demanded Graystone. "Did she try to butt in?"

Hakon told half the truth.

"She casually brought up the subject," he said. "It made me wonder how much she knew."

"Huh!" grunted his host. "You won't be obliged to see her very often—and not at all alone. Women can't keep their tongues out of questions any more than a boy can keep his out of a hollow tooth. Well, you can go and see Clara. Blame the postponement on to me, John. 'Bye."

"Good-night," answered Hakon, immensely relieved to get away, now that the lying and scheming of Mrs. Meshe had been discovered, and the threat-

ened clandestine marriage with Clara was out of the question. Placing his half-consumed cigar on the ash-tray, he left the room at once, meeting the servant at the door.

"I will see Miss Graystone, if she is in," he said to the man.

Clara was not only in, but she had a visitor. It was a gentleman, her former admirer, Ford Kelpie, who wore a monocle in his eye, perhaps in lieu of a light of intelligence, for his mental capacity was decidedly limited. He had recently returned from abroad, and was thoroughly determined to marry for money.

Despite a certain nervousness occasioned by the meeting of the two men, whom she mentally considered rivals for her hand and heart, Miss Graystone introduced them with much animation. The flattery of Mr. Kelpie's attentions had quite excited her latent charms.

Hakon made an honest effort to conduct at least a polite conversation with his new-made acquaintance, who constantly dropped his monocle from his eye at the most unexpected moments, only to screw it again in place with a wrenching grimace remarkable to see. So often as the bit of polished glass fell from its place, Clara started and giggled.

To Mr. Kelpie's platitudes Clara added observations of the utmost superficiality, descending, from time to time, to statements concerning her father's wealth that bordered on vulgarity. Unfortunately, she had early discovered that Kelpie derived exceptional delight from the topic of wealth.

For nearly half an hour Hakon endured this trying ordeal. At the end of that time he made his escape, not, however, without eliciting certain faintly affec-

tionate regrets on the part of Clara. On returning to Kelpie, when Hakon was gone, she was emboldened to coquetries and flirtations that verged upon exceptional boldness.

At the end of Kelpie's visit she was calling him "Ford," and her two hands lingered long upon his, as she prettily agreed to be his companion, on the following night, to view the pictures at the loan exhibition to which Hakon was going with Ruth.

XXIV

HAKON found himself in a peculiar and not particularly reassuring position, when he came to review all the facts that were now in his possession.

A good many hours of the day that followed his interview with Graystone were wasted in a vain endeavor to weigh the situation in all its various aspects. Mrs. Meshe had lied to him deliberately. Of this much he was sharply aware. She had sprung the threat of an immediate marriage with Clara for purposes entirely her own. She had cleverly constructed all the tissue of falsehood out of her own imagination. What for?

He recalled the adventure—every detail concerned with that meeting she had brought about. At the end of it he was convinced she had planned the entire affair, including the wine and the telegram from Graystone, to deceive him, and all without the slightest knowledge of the matter on Graystone's part.

Hakon had seen that Graystone was growing suspicious concerning Mrs. Meshe and himself. He had not been aware of this at once, but the case had been presented to him clearly before the evening had been finished.

The business resolved itself down very rapidly to a proposition which Hakon detested and dreaded. Mrs. Meshe had not only arranged that meeting in order to

have a glass of wine with himself alone, but she had dressed herself indecently—according to his canons—the more brazenly to exhibit her charms; and she had artfully contrived to keep him so worried and anxious that he would be very glad, indeed, to see her again, in equal privacy.

He remembered her every accent and gesture—and the languorous caresses she had made of her softened glances. He knew she had summoned him to that Orange room with almost any conjecturable intent, save that of discussing business. The one thing he did not and could not know was—how much she really knew of his secret, his relation to Ruth. And because he was nagged by worries, as well as for the reason that any real knowledge in her hands would be more than merely dangerous, he put in his time all day harassed by futile thinking.

There was, however, one end to which he came invariably: He would lend himself to none of her devices; he would quietly ignore her request to meet her again that evening. The tickets to the art exhibit should be used. He would take Ruth, as promised, to see the pictures, and the people, there on show.

That Bertha Meshe, scorned, would be an angered woman he could readily conceive. That she could work him harm he had no doubt. It all became a matter for speculation. How much did she know? How much could she do without Graystone's support, or even in opposition to his wishes? One element there was in Hakon's favor: Graystone, however unconsciously, was arrayed with himself, against this woman's scheming. But the notion of forming a coalition with Graystone to block the designs of Mrs. Meshe struck Hakon with a grim sense of humor. He

could fancy how happy the power of powers would become, should he ever become informed of this woman's treacheries.

But at least the thought of Graystone's support was something. Mrs. Meshe was, at most, a tool. She would scarcely dare proceed to any great lengths by way of interfering with the great political game; therefore he, Hakon, could afford to oppose, at least, some craft against her cunning. It preyed upon him, nevertheless, and kept him in a startled, uneasy state of mind. The whole political game was yet quite young. What other factors might yet appear to goad him towards insanity?

A dozen times, as he had before, he almost resolved to go to Ruth, tell her all about the wretched business, and then withdraw from it all—from all save the heaven that had opened for him in her eyes. Yet how much of her love was for just himself, and how much was for what he might become politically, he could not possibly determine. And loving her more with every passing day, he had not the courage to take a chance of losing ever so little of her esteem or admiration. He hungered for it all; he trembled to think of how precious it was, how priceless, when compared with anything or everything he had ever known in all the world.

They went to the show that evening, driving in a hansom.

All the way from the house to the galleries in Fifty-seventh Street, Hakon was strung to the highest pitch of intensity by the very proximity of Ruth at his side.

As they passed a street lamp, flinging its brilliant electric glare abroad, the light fell squarely upon them. Hakon was looking straight at Ruth, as she

was gazing steadfastly at him. He beheld again that wonderful aureole of her dark, mahogany hair, that radiant beauty of her face, that soul-awakening expression in her eyes—the look that he was finally beginning to know was such a confession of her love, as her lips—even gifted with the divinity of eloquence—could never frame. It gave him more than an ecstasy—it gave him holy fear, a sense of mystic prophecy, and a new, triumphant hope in the immortality of man. He was shaken, awed, subdued, exalted—all in a breath; and over all and under all played the passion that made it sublime. He dared not try to comprehend the entirety of happiness that her eyes, in their declaration, promised for them both. It was too much to know—and remain self-possessed.

His lips parted and, as if by some volition other than his own, he murmured two short words:

"My wife!"

She crimsoned instantly. The look in her eyes fled abruptly, and a bright but somewhat timid expression took its place. For answer she took his little finger in her hand for half a second, and gave it a tiny hug.

"Now!" she said. "You hadn't any right to make me do that! But—of course I've got on my gloves."

She was thinking of what she had said concerning the keeping of their secret from her hands. He knew her thought precisely. It was strange what an understanding there was between them.

"We're here," he said. "And the show must be popular, indeed."

He judged from the carriages only. They were gathered before the gallery and all down the street like a herd of prodigious, blackly glistening beetles,

uneasily moving about, their side-lamps gleaming like fiery eyes.

"People always come like this when the tickets cost five dollars apiece," said Ruth, sagely. "They think the pictures are very much better than they will be to-morrow, at fifty cents," and she laughed. "I'm so glad," she added, "that we don't care whether the pictures are good or bad."

"You said you hoped they'd prove to be bad," he corrected.

"Well, I sha'n't mind their being good, if only you'll talk to me a very great deal," she confessed. "I am very happy, even if I mustn't let you know it."

He helped her out of the hansom and they entered the building, along with people displaying every possible advertisement of wealth—men white-fronted and very much alike, in evening attire—women bedecked with sparkling jewels in dazzling profusion and gowned in silks and satins, laces and furbelows fresh from the looms of the world's famed artisans. A hundred daintily slippered feet trod the few steps leading into the galleries; a hundred fragrances of luxury laded the air.

Hakon, while Ruth was disposing of her wraps, stood at his ease regarding the scene in his customary gravity. In his faultless evening suit he presented a striking figure, at once austere, commanding, and handsome. His deep-set eyes were alight with fire unmistakable. His splendid brow and his largely moulded nose conveyed a sense of strength that was amply confirmed by his firm, large mouth and his resolute chin.

Three women, who had paused involuntarily to look at him again, beheld the faint but engaging

smile with which he greeted Ruth, now rapidly approaching, and were thrilled in the breath that also made them almost envious.

"Everybody's here," said Ruth. "Those two nice girls you met with us the other day, Miss Cranmer and Miss Weeve, said they hoped we'd come across them before we go."

"I haven't seen any one I know," he answered. "But I can see one picture already, even from here, that is mighty bad."

"That's splendid!" said Ruth. "But I do hope the poor artist isn't still alive."

She presently had reason to hope that many a poor, misguided painter had not survived his atrocities, for Hakon certainly spared very few. And he knew whereof he spoke. New York City is filled with pictures acquired by their owners because the prices were high, or because the praises of a salesman, domestic or foreign, had been most flagrantly extravagant.

"Many of these were purchased because they are a full yard long and thirty inches wide," said Hakon. "But why they were painted must forever remain a mystery."

He explained why it is that pictures so frequently fail, why it is that they represent a dire and deplorable waste of time, canvas, energy, and pigment.

"The first great canon of art," he said, "is selection. If the object painted is not worthy of being presented, no amount of skill or technique can make the picture acceptable. The artist should first be certain that he is selecting something worth while before he puts so much as a crayon to paper. The picture should contain a poem, grave or gay, exquisite or homely, large or small—anything as long

as it is a real poem. It should represent something ennobling, uplifting, gratifying, amusing, entertaining, soothing, or—something. Good landscapes are good because nature is always beautiful, always appealing. Good scenes of heroism, good war pictures, awaken a sense of patriotism or of emulation in our breasts. Beautiful figures charm us and sting our ambition to go on and accomplish the beautiful ourselves. There are many worthy subjects. But a lot of dead fish, or a copper kettle, or a head of cabbage— Well, when we get to the point where, as refined and cultured people, we will sit and look at a table, loaded with the dead fish or vegetables—sit there enraptured, gazing on the beauty of these objects—then, and not till then, will the painting of them ever be justified. It's a mistake to think that a painting of a thing can be greater than the thing itself—otherwise pictures of Christ would be greater than Christ, and paintings of God's green fields or His mountains would be greater than His handiwork, in all its beauty or its majesty."

"Yes!" said Ruth. "Yes—I understand it; I see it! And why don't they know? Oh, I wish you would paint some splendid pictures!"

"I was given the knowledge and denied the skill," he answered. "Very often the rule is just reversed. Once in a while a painter possesses both, and we get magnificent results. There is nearly always one nice thing about a gallery, however; like to-night, there are interesting people to look at, anyway."

"There go the Hobarts," said Ruth. "They always take a catalogue and study it faithfully. They like it better than the pictures, especially when it really identifies a painting. If it says 'Cattle,' and they look up and see cows, they know it must be right.

So often one reads a title like 'Worm-Hunters at Daybreak,' or 'Wind on the Wold,' or 'Before Five o'Clock.' Are titles ever as bad as the paintings?"

Hakon was smiling. "I think they must be," he answered. "You must have studied art yourself."

"If I had to be an artist," said Ruth, quaintly, "I would prefer to be an old master. There is some excuse for men who painted in the Dark Ages."

"Who paints in the dark?" demanded a voice.

They turned about and beheld the round, good-natured face of Breeme.

"No lady ever does such a thing as that," he added. "How are you, anyway? You're both looking warm or healthy or happy, I can't tell which. Say, the daubing society of dubs haven't perpetrated many crimes? What?"

"Oh, don't you appreciate them either—these pictures?" said Ruth, extending her hand.

"Say, I can't pretend to know anything about art, but I know a decent, respectable picture," said Breeme. "And if I chance to see one here I'm going to go up and speak to it, politely and affectionately, without an introduction. What do you think, old man?"

"I think you may become tongue-tied on your long, desolate quest," said Hakon.

"Well, I'm off," said Breeme. "Look at that one behind you. Help! Help!" and he grinned and was gone.

"He gets funnier and fatter all the time," said Ruth. "Everybody likes Mr. Breeme."

"Yes," agreed Hakon; "he may not be restful, but he is refreshing. There go your two young girl friends now."

Ruth followed his glance and beheld Miss Weeve

and Miss Cranmer diligently visiting picture after picture in a search for "composition," "texture," "drawing," "technique," or "mystery." Of the latter they found an abundance, but they were obviously worried.

"Poor dears," murmured Ruth. "They are very serious over art."

"There is a large room we have yet to visit," said Hakon. "We may see some interesting people there."

They made their way towards the farther gallery slowly. The rooms were crowded with visitors, many seated, many talking, in groups, without paying the slightest regard to the paintings, many exclaiming in rapturous delight over "gems" that were marked in the catalogue as having been loaned by persons of known and acknowledged wealth.

It was a brilliant throng on the polished floors, for, after all, the affair was intended, primarily, to be one of social importance. In the larger room to which Ruth and Hakon were coming, an orchestra was sometimes heard, above the droning of the voices, as it played a delicate, airy serenade by Strelezki.

Ruth would gladly have abandoned the pictures for a dance, could the floor have been cleared and the orchestra induced to play a waltz. She had never in her life felt so enraptured by a thought of dancing. She knew instantly it was merely because of her wish to dance with this husband, who was not yet her husband, walking at her side.

"Oh, I'm glad we came in here!" she said. "Shall we try to get nearer to the music?"

They searched the walls as they went, meeting disappointment so often that, if some small picture

did chance to be good, it was missed, for keeping such company.

Near the end of the room they halted.

"Let's stand here, just for a moment," said Ruth. "I like this much better—this orchestra."

Behind Hakon some man was talking, in a querulous growl of sarcasm, rather amusing.

"There she is again," said a woman's voice. "Now look. Don't you think her expression is very animated?"

"Her face is exceedingly active," answered the querulous man. "She looks like an old maid who has just written a thesis on 'How to Rear Children, Though Married.' No one but an old maid ever beams on a man like that. Come along. She's heading for us now."

They moved away. Hakon glanced down the room to see the "animated expression." Then his color changed abruptly. It was Clara Graystone.

She was talking excitedly to Kelpie, and her countenance was certainly "active." They were slowly approaching, as the cynic had said; and Ruth had lost herself, for the moment, in the sheer delight which the music bestowed upon her senses.

From a double bench, with seats that faced in two directions from one common back, a couple now arose. Hakon saw what he hoped was an opportunity to avoid Clara's scrutiny of every one within the room.

"Let's sit down for a moment," he said, and taking Ruth by the arm somewhat firmly, he led her to the bench before she had time to consent.

"Oh, this is better," she said. "Listen," and dropping her hand on Hakon's, unconsciously, she held to it with subtly increasing fervor, as the passion

of the music rose and fanned her own love with its breaths of melody.

On the farther side of the bench Hakon knew that Clara must have come within a yard or two of where he was sitting with Ruth. He felt the movement of two or three persons who now arose from the seat and started again on the dreary rounds of inspecting the pictures.

"Miss Clara," said a voice that Hakon recognized, "we might rest a moment, mightn't we?"

Then Clara, with her admirer, sat down, her hat fairly scraping Hakon's head as she leaned back against the support of the bench.

"Oh, I do think the pictures are sweet!" she said.

Ruth was jarred quite back to realities. She took her hand from Hakon's, coloring rosily as she realized what she had been doing.

"Are you very much bored?" she inquired of Hakon, whose face betrayed something to her intuitive comprehension.

"Not in the least," he answered, in a voice barely audible to Ruth herself, and therefore unheard by Miss Graystone; and he thought to himself that "bored" was not precisely the word to express his feelings.

Ruth was looking at him searchingly.

"Please don't stay till you find it tiresome," she said. "Because—you know it was I who wanted to come."

"I like the music—very much," he murmured.

Ruth, instantly happy again, listened hungrily. What Hakon heard, however, was the voice of Clara Graystone.

"We can't even talk, for those fiddles," she said. "But I love to sit here with you, anyway. Perhaps we shall see some one we know."

She turned about in her seat and looked up the room, between Hakon's head and Ruth's. Hakon could feel her breath upon his ear. He could have plunged from his seat to go madly from the place; but he sat there rigidly, and waited for Clara to turn her attention once more to Kelpie.

This she presently did. "I guess you're the best company here," she said, in a mood of playfulness; and she tapped his arm with her fan, laughing girlishly whensoever she spoke.

Hakon hated to sit here, like an eavesdropper, overhearing her encouragements of Kelpie. He hoped, above all things, to be spared a meeting with her face to face. Yet to make an excuse for leaving the seats, while Ruth was so thoroughly enjoying the music, would be a retreat to which he could not consent.

Meantime, the orchestra was weaving a wholly charming caprice to the final phrases of the serenade; and the springlike spirit of the composition awoke new esctasies in Ruth's delighted nature. The music was voicing what she could not speak; and her heart was beating to the cadence, happily.

The voice of Clara Graystone struck discordantly once more on Hakon's ears.

"I hope dear John didn't come to-night," she said, with a very heavy sigh. "He would be so disappointed; and I am having such a perfectly heavenly time. Don't you think he's real nice-looking?"

"Who?" said Kelpie.

Hakon was suddenly apprehensive that Clara, in explaining herself, would pronounce his family name. If she should, nothing could prevent Ruth from hearing it. She was already evincing an annoyance which proved that she, also, overheard that persistent voice so near at hand.

"Why, Ford," said Clara, "you must know who John is. Why, I introduced you last evening. Mr.—"

"Oh," interrupted Kelpie, and he dropped his glass from his eye as he turned to regard Miss Graystone more intelligently.

"There!" she cried. "Oh, that funny thing does give me such a start. It seems as if your clothes, or something, is falling off."

"Oh!" said Mr. Kelpie, as before, and he screwed it once more in its place.

Hakon breathed again, but his brow was damp and a fever was heating his veins.

The music came to an end abruptly. Ruth sat perfectly still, her face irradiating beauty. It had given her a wonderful joy.

"Now I want to go, right away," she said. "And there are the girls, anyway, and we ought to speak to them, of course."

Hakon had never been more thankful to leave a place in his life; for Clara, on the opposite side of the bench, was reverting to the subject of himself with stubborn pertinacity.

He and Ruth almost startled the two girl students of art, so absorbed were the pair in their search for something to add to their learning.

"Oh, Mr. Hakon," pleaded Miss Weeve," do tell us whether all these pictures are good or not. If they are—my heart will break!"

"They have already broken my heart," he said, "but quite the other way. Cheer up and go see something worth the while, at the Metropolitan, tomorrow."

"Oh, thank you so much!" said Miss Cranmer. "We were really getting anxious. One doesn't like

to think one's self an imbecile—and the only one in a crowd so large as this."

"You poor dears!" said Ruth. "These aren't pictures, they are works. When you say 'works,' Mr. Hakon, doesn't that mean they are labored?"

"I heard a man once call a painting 'rare,'" said Hakon, "because it was not well done."

Ruth added: "And I once heard a farmer's wife describe a painting. She said: 'It's one of them pictures that the closer up you git the worse it looks, and the farther off you stand the less you can tell what it is.'"

"I'm as glad as when I used to get out of school for the day!" declared Miss Weeve, and she threw down her catalogue vehemently. "That's the kind of pictures all these are! Chummy, let's go home."

"No," said Miss Cranmer, "let's stay for fifteen minutes and see the people. We ought to get something for our money."

Hakon and Ruth, however, departed. He took her home in a hansom, and bade her good-night at the door.

"Some day we're going to have the dearest times in the world," she said, in her happiness. "I'm getting afraid to see you very often. Good-night," and she slipped inside the hall before he could answer.

Coming down the steps he dismissed the carriage. He preferred to walk. And he chose Fifth Avenue down which to go strolling and thinking.

It was not until he came to a great hotel that he suddenly halted and looked up sharply at its tall, red bulk. Then he remembered that Mrs. Meshe must have spent at least a portion of the evening, waiting in vain for him to come, at that Orange room in a somewhat similar building.

XXV

MRS. MESHE had, indeed, waited that evening, long and with growing impatience. She had come there arrayed even more beautifully than on the former occasion; she had come with a taste of wine still upon her senses, and the fire and fragrance of it clinging to her subtly, as if they found her their goddess. She had come with a smile on her sensuous lips and a molten gleam of deviltry in her eyes—and all had gone to waste.

The artifices, spontaneous and rehearsed, with which she had expected to fascinate John Hakon, had felt themselves cheated when he failed to arrive. The animal, lightly caged in her being, had substituted savage anger for purring playfulness, when at length she had conceived herself ignored or scorned.

Had Hakon come there half an hour late, all would still have been well in her somewhat nettled nature. Even at the end of her first hour of waiting, she could still have subdued her increasing wrath and played him a game only partially cruel. After that she had waited for half an hour more, in the hope that he might still appear as a sort of legitimate prey to the mood his neglect had engendered. When she had found herself obliged to leave at last, baffled and humiliated, a dangerous passion was consuming her blood.

A woman denied the opportunity of striking when her anger is hottest becomes the more insidiously

threatening. Mrs. Meshe would not have turned on Hakon, in the morning, with scorching glances nor a searing tongue; she had simply made up her mind to conquer him, bring him to her feet, lay him utterly beneath her will, or—failing in this—destroy him through the agencies that she knew were working now to compel success in his political behalf at the bidding of Amos Graystone. A hundred devices of trickery she knew, a hundred wiles came home to her mind every night of the world for shelter.

Like every other woman who refuses to accept the belief, belittling to herself, that a man has deliberately scorned her proffered friendship, Mrs. Meshe had moments in which she tried to excuse John Hakon's conduct. He might have been detained by some legitimate engagement; he might have wished, very much indeed, to meet her as requested in her letter, but found himself unable to escape some other and less agreeable demand upon his time. But reaction, malignantly following this sop to her pride, increased the bitterness of her rancor. Nevertheless, she would give Hakon one more chance. He could have missed her letter. The next time she would see that no possibility of such a mistake could arise; and if he came—he must pay the price for having neglected to do so much as even to send her an answer, a formal regret.

Inasmuch as Hakon's right to ignore her invitation for any merely private reason was denied, she wished very much indeed to know whether he had spent the evening in Graystone's company or not. But as she herself was supposed to be in Boston, accomplishing certain important ends, she could not at once determine on a plan whereby she could ascertain the facts concerning this point, without betray-

ing her presence in New York City. Having, however, intended to catch an early morning train for Boston, she bestirred herself in season, and worked out a simple expedient as her journey was drawing to a close.

As a result of her cogitations, she proceeded at once, on arriving at Boston, to call up her chief on the long-distance 'phone.

"Is that you, Gray?" she inquired, when connections were completed. "All right. How are you? This is Bertha—yes. I'm in Boston. Worked all day yesterday, and will have to get at it again this morning. Work's a little slow, but all our friends tell me it's going to be sure. I don't suppose you've seen John very recently?"

She listened to Graystone's reply alertly.

"Oh, you saw him night before last?" she repeated. "Um-hum. I thought he might have been around to see you last night."

"Think he went out to some sort of dinky show with Clara," said the voice that came across the wire. "What difference does it make to you, anyway?"

"I want to see him begin to look a little anxious," said the woman, telling at least a portion of the truth. "The time is getting short. If he's lukewarm now—I don't like it. I want to see that he takes a good live interest."

"Suppose you try to think more about looking pretty, and leave this man to me," suggested Graystone. "Ring off and get to work."

"Nasty old bear," answered Mrs. Meshe, laughing into the instrument. "Here's a kiss," and she made a fairly representative sound, popularly supposed to pass for an osculation. "'Bye." And she hung up the receiver. Her object had been attained.

Hakon was almost to be pardoned—if not even just a little pitied.

She went at her work, no less determined than before to bring Hakon down to her feet, for that was the way of her feminine mind; but now she once more permitted her feeling of physical attraction towards the man to underlie her plans.

In the mean time Hakon, who had half-way expected some word of reproof, or of inquiry, from the woman whom he had refused to meet, awaited the sign in vain. He would have felt a something akin to relief had any such word been forthcoming. At least he would know what mood to expect in Mrs. Meshe, who would not, he was certain, be content to drop the affair at such a stage as this. Her silence this morning was not reassuring. The dread of what she might do, which had slumbered in peace throughout the previous evening, awoke anew with the other myriad thoughts that coursed through his brain as he paced his office floor. At length he sought refuge in his work.

Among the letters that came that day there was one from Clara containing a florid declaration of how much she had missed him the evening before. This made him smile somewhat grimly. A note from Ruth arrived later in the day. In it she told him that Mr. Hobart was planning to take a party to a house-warming, out beyond Newfoundland, New Jersey, this coming Saturday afternoon, and they'd all like to have him come along and help to celebrate the completion of the new country home. And perhaps he'd like to take herself and Mrs. Hobart in his car!

Pleasure kindled its warm little camp-fire in Hakon's being at once. It was becoming fairly danger-

ous, the way he could and did forget everything else the moment a word arrived from Ruth. He sat down and wrote an acceptance of her invitation then and there.

In the afternoon Breeme appeared, only for a moment, just to "pass the good word," he explained, and inquire how things were going.

"Say," said he, "I heard to-day—from Roberts, as usual—that the Wall Street contingent were gathering campaign funds as long as a month or more ago."

"What for?" inquired Hakon, instantly alert to know how much this Roberts might have discovered.

"Nobody knows," answered Breeme. "Christmas presents, perhaps. But the funny part of it was that they tackled Uncle Russell. They did it as a joke, probably. He's so stingy you couldn't get a nickel out of him unless you took it with instruments. Roberts says he wouldn't be surprised if the money is wanted in an effort to nominate an eighteen-carat gold man on the ticket. It's anything, he says—anything to beat Brevoort."

"Is Roberts likely to find out anything definite?" inquired Hakon, fussing with the papers on his desk. "Is any one on the inside, I mean, responsible at times for a leak of reliable news?"

"Not often," answered Breeme. "It never pays to squeal, and the day when man becomes immune to the glint of gold—look out! That will be the day when the lawyer and the lamb lie down together. 'Wake me early, mother darling,' and buy me a field-glass that will bring things right up close. Well—I've got to be going. So long."

"Come around again, whenever you get the time," said Hakon. "We must have another dinner together."

"By-the-way," said Breeme, "when do I get that ride in your auto? I want to get used to scaring people half to death pretty soon."

Hakon thought for a moment. "Why, I'd like to look up a road in Jersey," he answered. "Suppose we try it to-morrow."

"In the morning?" said Breeme. "What time?"

"Say at half-past ten. Meet me at the garage, in Forty-third Street," Hakon answered. "Or earlier, if you prefer."

"Make it nine-thirty," suggested Breeme. "I'll be there with my trunk full of courage and my will in my inside pocket. If the engine balks, tap yours truly for hot air." He grinned and went his way.

Promptly enough on the following morning the ride commenced. Hakon preferred to know his way when the trip planned for Saturday afternoon should demand his attention; hence he had studied his road maps to very good purpose, and now intended to test out the route he had selected.

They proceeded out Broadway and Riverside Drive to the Fort Lee ferry, crossed the Hudson on the boat, and then rode for a matter of at least thirty miles into country as beautiful as man could wish to employ for such an excursion. Returning they chose a road that branched to the southward, and climbing the Palisades much nearer to Hoboken, emerged at length upon the Hudson County Boulevard, that dips and curves along the summit of the river's Jersey embankment, high above the slowly moving tide. Beholding such a panoramic profile view of New York City as may not be had from any other available point, Hakon mentally determined to choose this route when Saturday afternoon should arrive.

They were back in New York at three o'clock. The car had behaved like a big mechanical cherub, finding only pleasure in its work. Breeme discovered the dust upon their garments.

"Say," said he, "I'll run a free special train to the back of my neck, have a picnic on the grounds, and sell a parcel of Jersey lots."

After a luncheon they parted. Hakon went down to his office, merely to read any letters which might have been delivered. He found but one — from Clara. She knew she should see him that evening. She failed, however, to add that she would otherwise be exceptionally lonely, as Kelpie could not be present at her home.

Hakon was idly folding the letter and gazing from his window when a knock, more than ordinarily aggressive, was sounded on his door, and in came a messenger, viciously chewing at a mighty quid of gum.

He delivered a letter.

"Been here twice already," said the boy. "Sign here, please. Any answer?"

Hakon opened the envelope, and saw the name of Mrs. Meshe. Her note was brief.

"So sorry you had an engagement before. I've been in Boston, working hard. Saw Gray again this afternoon. Must leave for Philadelphia at five-thirty. Meet me Saturday evening at seven, without fail, at ——," and she furnished an address. The note concluded: "Send reply by the boy."

"Any answer?" demanded the messenger again, chewing with renewed vigor. "Wot?"

"Wait a minute," said Hakon, still staring out of the window.

The boy sat down with startling abruptness, snatched a closely printed tale from his pocket, and began to devour the exclamation points with which it was more than merely sprinkled.

Hakon read the note again. Its peremptory tone not only made him slightly angry, but it also awakened a hibernating dread in his thoughts. Moreover, her opening sentence, "Sorry you had an engagement before," was disconcerting. How did she know that he had already promised to take Ruth to the art show when her other note arrived? Was she actually aware that he had spent the evening with Ruth? It looked as if she were. She must have had him watched, or she must have pried into private affairs.

His anger increased. He had planned to take both Ruth and Mrs. Hobart into the country on Saturday afternoon; it would never be possible to return for this second engagement, demanded so boldly for Saturday evening.

Was it to be Ruth, to whom his promise was made, or was this something half afraid—this something within him that dreaded Mrs. Meshe—to dictate whither he should go?

Had the summons come from Graystone, the affair would have appeared in a light altogether different. But from this brazen woman—

He went to his desk and wrote the answer demanded.

"I regret the necessity of replying that once more a prior engagement makes the pleasure impossible."

He signed his initials only, then scratched them out. The note looked untidy. He copied it freshly,

and, leaving it quite unsigned, sealed it in an envelope, addressed it, and gave it to the boy.

That same evening, when he called at the Graystone residence and Clara kissed him most effusively, he felt that his cup was brimming full indeed.

XXVI

THE gods chose that Saturday on which to lavish riches of sunshine, fragrance, and zephyrs. The few white clouds that rode across the sky only added to the beauty of the heavens, as ships add beauty to the seas.

Hakon arrived at the Hobarts' place in his car at eleven o'clock. Hobart, with his friends, had departed already on the train. Mrs. Hobart and Ruth were all but ready when a message came from Mrs. Hobart's mother that she was feeling ill and wished very much for Alice to come.

His car being ready at hand, Hakon took Mrs. Hobart to her mother's home, and waited at the curb till she should reappear from the house. More than an hour went by. Then at last she ran down the steps, minus her hat, and looking a little distraught.

"Mother is not at all well," she said. "I'm a little anxious, but not enough to worry Ruth. I won't attempt to go up-country, however, so you and Ruth had better start without waiting any longer. I'd be sorry to have her miss the trip; and I know you'll take her safely. Good-bye."

"But," said Hakon, "perhaps Miss Sherwood might prefer to remain and assist you. If she does—"

"No, no, no," expostulated Mrs. Hobart, honestly. "I want her to go and have a good time. I will

'phone just as soon as I go in the house. Mr. Hobart would be very much disappointed if nobody came, and I feel I cannot go. That's all, and I'll say good-bye again. I hope you'll have a very pleasant run."

Ruth, when Hakon came again before the house where she made her home, came running down the steps with a satchel in her hand. She was rosy with happiness.

"May I ride in front again, with you?" she said, placing her satchel in the rear of the car. "Or must I go in the tonneau here, as freight?"

Inasmuch as she was clambering in beside him as she spoke, Hakon smiled at her naïve remark.

"It's only Satan that we bid to get behind us," he answered, "and even then it's often a mere affectation."

"Let's not be epigrammatical and clever to-day," said Ruth. "Let's just be human."

"You've begun by being superhumanly beautiful this morning," he said, prompted by a very deviltry of joy, with which the air was redolent. "It's lucky the car is not susceptible." And he started down the street.

"Humbug!" she murmured, but her nature was tumultuous with pleasure.

Hakon's entire attention was required by the car as soon as they came to Fifth Avenue's heterogeneous traffic. At Fifty-ninth Street they turned to the right, and ran along the entire front of Central Park, as far as Seventh Avenue, down which Hakon turned. To the Weehawken ferry, at the foot of Forty-second Street, they came just in time to catch a boat about to depart.

It was not, however, till the boat had landed, and the car was once more out in the open and snorting

its way up the hill with which the highway commences, that the trip seemed fairly inaugurated.

That Weehawken climb terminates at the brow of the hill that divides the course of the Hudson River from the valley and meadows of the Hackensack on the farther side. Along its brim the magnificent Hudson County Boulevard has been laid, a broad, blue-gray highway, from the heights of which New York City, rising from its island, looms in features absolutely unique.

From the Battery to Yonkers the town may be seen, its marvellous commercial buildings fairly dwarfing the once lofty spires of the churches, its banners of pure white steam being flung to the breeze from exhausts innumerable.

Ruth marvelled at the mighty architectural forms, reared so stupendously above the river's tide. She cried out in pleasure when she saw and recognized the Soldiers' and Sailors' monument, and the tomb of Grant, standing in the long green strip of park that beautifies the river's natural bank. The Hudson presented a wonderful spectacle itself. The picture, as a whole, was one on which the son of man could only gaze with pride and thrills of admiration for the achievements of his kind.

When the brow of the hill was at length deserted by the road, the car was soon plunging down a slope towards the level monotony of the Hackensack meadows, through which the tide-streams ebb and flow in murky, slow-moving rivers.

The pretty little town of Hackensack itself, with its tree-lined, brick-paved streets, was passed, and the road that Hakon selected led on through a land of beauty, towards Paterson, dark with the arts of manufacture.

It was not until Paterson also was behind them, and the car was climbing hills again that pave the way to modest mountains, that Ruth revealed a little secret.

"I've brought along a box of luncheon, for two," she said. "May we stop somewhere and eat it together?"

"Do you think we'll get hungry?" answered Hakon.

"I'm hungry for these pretty places now," she replied. "It's beautiful. It seems such a pity to rush along and waste these charming scenes. Nook after nook—with nobody in them at all. Don't they really have any summer resorts up around here? There must be some delightful resorts."

"If you want to know the best resorts, ask a mosquito," Hakon told her, gravely. "They know them all."

"The married couples ought to know a few," she retorted. "I'm going to get hungry for lunch before so very long, whether you do or not. Besides, the car will want to rest."

Hakon felt that sunshine and Ruth together would prove too much for his nature to support in any sort of calm.

"Hunger is a positive peril," he said, only half in jest. "We shall have to stop where we can get a drink of water to go with the pickles and pie and dough-nuts."

"We haven't got either pickles or pie or dough-nuts," Ruth informed him, archly. "We've got a civilized lunch. But isn't it funny what things people will eat at a picnic? Here's a nice little stream of good, clear water now."

"But the car couldn't rest if it stood in the middle

of the road," said Hakon. "And passing teams might not have time to stop for a bite of our civilized repast."

"I love the way you tell me sensible things," she answered, impulsively. "You may stop the car wherever you prefer."

In a beautiful stretch of level land where a mixture of forest trees and blossoming fruit trees made a grove in which the very dryads themselves might have lingered, an old and unused road branched off towards the rill wherein that same small stream they had seen before had its bed. Hakon slowed down the mechanism, steered his purring monster into the sylvan glade, and presently brought it to a stand-still in sight of the highway.

"The creek is only fifty yards below us," he said, "and if the dining-room is sufficiently civilized for the lunch, and her majesty, the princess, we will seek no farther."

"This is lovely," said Ruth. "Look at those fruit trees, pink and white with beauty. I love them! You can make all the fun you please—but you like it, all the same." She removed her satchel from the tonneau and leaped to the ground. "Here's a lovely flat rock for the table," she added. "Now you take this jug and go to the creek for the water, while I put on the cloth and set out the things. Take off your cap in the house."

Hakon took off his cap and tossed it on the ground.

He received the jug from her hand, and caught one sweet, mischievous look from her eyes. She had raised her veil and her rosy beauty held him absolutely enslaved.

"Go along," she said. "Get some nice cold water."

"Where? Oh yes," he said, then he started along.

She paused at her task to watch him going. She pressed her hand on her heart for very ecstasy. The ring that she wore beneath her gown impinged against her flesh. Suddenly blushing, she drew it out, on its tiny chain, removed it from its bondage, and slipped it on her finger. Happiness spread anew throughout her every pulse.

Hakon, when he came with the pitcher of water, found her busy indeed. A white cloth had transformed the gray old rock completely. On it, in snowy napkins, was spread the daintiest and most inviting of collations. He stood there watching her deft hands arranging all in attractive order. Then his glance fell quickly on the gleaming gold band she had dared to assume.

"Is—is that just exactly safe?" he said.

"What?" said Ruth. "That glass? It can't possibly fall."

"I wasn't looking at the glass," he answered.

She glanced up, caught the direction of his gaze, and turned superbly pink, even to the tips of her ears.

"That?" she said, in a happy utterance she could not control, as she held up the ring in the sunlight. "I've got to put it on sometimes, because—because I simply have to! . . . I'll take it off just the minute you ask me to do so."

She had looked for a second only into his eyes. She was standing before him now with downcast lids, her bosom heaving rapidly.

Hakon trembled, even as his car frequently quivered, with suppressed power surging mightily within him. He moved a step forward; his shaking hands

were rising, slowly rising to clasp Ruth by the arms. But he checked himself, with an effort, even as Ruth, in her womanly strength, moved quickly away.

She took up the pitcher of water and poured out a glassful.

"There," she said. "We'll begin the lunch with this."

He took it gladly and drank.

"I'll get the cushions from the car for dining-chairs," he said, and he fetched them promptly.

Throughout the little meal the birds were singing boldly of their love and their nesting. The first cruising bees carried pollen from one blushing blossom to another, and left the flower ravished and thrilling. The young leaves shook in the zephyr as if to tinkle out the wellnigh intangible melody of an early summer sigh. In one of the pink-and-white fruit trees three scarlet tanagers flickered redly among the branches. And Ruth and Hakon were keenly alive to it all.

When the luncheon was finished, Ruth put the things away.

"Some day I'm going to be a housewife," she said, "and then I'll say I love you just as often as I please." She colored and laughed delightfully.

He said: "How often will it be?"

"Oh, I don't know," she answered, archly, "I never was good at figures, particularly multiplication. Are we ready to go?"

He was standing with his hand against a tree, gazing at her steadily.

"I think so," he answered, and taking her satchel from the ground he placed it again in the car.

She brought him his cap. He took it without permitting his hand to come in contact with hers.

But the look in her eyes, softened, beautified, resistless, held his own as if in a clasp that even hands are forever denied. Once again, as he had before, he murmured:

"My wife!"

Then the sun was momentarily obliterated by a passing cloud.

Ruth took his cap from his listless hand and placed it on his head. This much was not to be resisted. A moment of absolute silence followed.

"There!" she said, breaking the spell. "That's another thing I've no right to be doing! I hope it isn't going to rain."

"I don't think it will," he answered, glancing up where the sun was once more shining gloriously. "But we must move along."

She mounted again to her seat.

"Good-bye, dear woods," said Ruth. "This was our first little house." She tossed a kiss to the glade.

The things that Hakon wished to say were repressed. He started the engine, got in, reversed the car, backed around, and was presently heading again up the road. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter after three.

'We are fully half-way on our journey," he said. "But that engine is making an odd little noise that I hardly like."

XXVII

FOR another five miles they sped along at a rapid speed, Hakon bending forward peculiarly to listen to the something that spoke to his super-educated senses from the mechanism. At the foot of a hill the rhythmic beat of the engine was suddenly interrupted—cut in twain.

Instantly Hakon threw out the clutch and brought the car to a halt.

"What is it?" said Ruth.

"One engine has stopped," he answered. "It's a two-cylinder motor, and one isn't working, that's all."

He opened a small, polished box on the dash, revealing the vibrators of his electric coil, as mystic to Ruth as the laws of the planets themselves. Quickly ascertaining which of the cylinders it was that was balking, he adjusted the spark with the screws and presently had the satisfaction of hearing the double explosions, below in the muffler, that indicated order restored.

"Perhaps it will be all right now," said Hakon. "We're losing time whenever this occurs." He glanced for a second at the sky, which was darkening towards the east somewhat sullenly.

The country through which the car was merrily romping again was more and more beautiful as the mountains increased in dimensions. Once or

twice the machine had crossed the railroad over which Hobart and his friends had gone several hours earlier. The houses were particularly isolated and meagre. Now and again a place was quite deserted.

To the features of the landscape Hakon paid but little attention. That annoying little sound still came from his engine.

When the motor once more repeated its stubborn performance, he feared the trouble lay deeper than any mere maladjustment of the coil. Nevertheless, as he had once already restarted that troublesome cylinder by pothering with the screws, he again opened the polished box and tried to coax his engine to obedience.

No less than six explosions in the muffler followed. Ruth endured the ordeal courageously.

Half an hour of fruitless toil, in which Hakon began to perspire, resulted in nothing. Then once more the mechanism, for no apparent reason, took up its duties. Hakon now raced the car at the top of its speed, up hill and down, in fear of another of its spells. The sky, meantime, was blackening ominously.

A lone house, small, unpainted, and five miles or more away from its nearest neighbor, was passed at a dangerous speed. A mile farther on, where a hill lay in wait, the engine sounded some mechanical groan, and half of it met a sudden death.

The darkness, hastened by the coming storm, and confirmed by the lateness of the hour, began to descend. Hakon worked like a demon, urging, experimenting, stopping the engine altogether and starting it afresh, but all to no avail. That one dead cylinder could not again be revived.

In despair of correcting the difficulty by adjusting

that deceitful coil, he finally screwed off a cup on the motor that concealed the commutator. There, after burning himself severely on the scorching hot metal of the cylinders, he came upon a trifling disorder that made further running absolutely impossible. One of two twin springs, merely cracked before, had been broken short off, at last.

Hakon took it out in his hand and looked at it quietly. It seemed but an insignificant thing to disable the motor and interfere so completely with their journey, but it typified many of the vital things of existence.

"We're anchored," he said, "unless I've got a part like this in my kit, and I don't believe I have."

"Do you mean you can't make it go any more?" inquired Ruth. "Not another inch?"

"I shall have to move it out of the road," answered Hakon. "But our ride has come to an end."

Ruth was silent for a moment.

"It's an awful pretty place to stop," she said, when she spoke. "But, of course—" and there she halted.

Hakon was looking through the small collection of valves, screws, and other extra parts contained in a box in his locker. There was nothing there in any manner resembling the broken spring.

"Perhaps we can hire a horse at that place we passed," he suggested. "We are twenty miles, at the least, from Mr. Hobart's house."

"It's going to rain," said Ruth, good-naturedly. "I don't care. I think it's kind of jolly, anyway. Please don't you worry—will you, dear?"

She had never spoken more tenderly in all her life. She had never used such a term as "dear" before. It came now like a sudden renewal of the

sunshine to Hakon, yet he knew he must still remain unmoved.

"I've got to think of you," he said. "We must start for that house, a mile or so back on the road, right away. I'll run the car under the trees yonder, out of the road."

Ruth jumped out promptly. Her satchel Hakon had removed already. He started the one cylinder, still obedient to his will, and by throwing in the lowest gear, urged the car from the highway and under an archway of trees where it was very well concealed. Ruth stood alone in the road awaiting his return. She watched him quietly, but her heart was beating in a mood that was far from reposeful. A streak of lightning, far away on the mountains, startled her senses. What the oncoming storm and night portended she could not know.

Hakon returned at once. What might become of his car he neither knew nor cared. But what could be done with Ruth bore heavily upon his mind.

"I hope it won't rain till we get to that house," he said, as he took up the satchel. "I'm sorry about it all."

They were walking down the road.

"You are worried," she said. "It wasn't anybody's fault. It couldn't be helped. You must let me try to help you now. You know—I've got just a little bit of a right to help."

He knew she referred to the fact that they were, as a matter of fact, man and wife. It touched him profoundly, but it also alarmed him quite as much. He had never loved her with a regard more holy.

"We'll know the place, for it's the only one," he said, evasively. "It's growing dark very fast."

"You are walking just a little bit rapidly for me," she answered. "May I take your arm?"

She could have taken his life, in the mood that played upon his heart. Yet the arm he gave her was as rigidly unresponsive as wood.

She clung to it lightly, aware of his struggle to maintain the safeguards of indifference. Nevertheless, she was very happy indeed, walking past the silent trees and up the darkening road, where all nature was singularly hushed, awaiting the crack and roar of the oncoming storm. Her heart was exulting in his strength. Her nature thrilled at the thought that she was his and that he belonged to her, and that here they were, alone, and together, like the pair in Eden's grove.

"I hope we haven't passed the place," said Hakon at last, when it seemed as if they must have walked much more than a mile. "It's so dark that we might, unless they had a light."

Ruth clung a little more tightly to his arm. A few large drops of rain descended, plumping audibly into the dust of the road.

"It really can't hurt us," said Ruth, cheerfully. "It's a warm, nice rain."

Fortunately, however, this first preliminary sprinkle passed immediately.

"Even nice rain is wet," Hakon answered. "There it is—there's the house—and no light shining."

"And no little dog to bark," added Ruth. "You don't suppose it's deserted?"

"I hope not," Hakon replied. "But I've got to find shelter for you."

Again Ruth thought of the right they had to share a shelter together, but she held back the answer that rose to her lips. It was she who had added conditions to the secret of their marriage.

At the gate of the tiny garden in which the house

was standing, Hakon decided the place was not abandoned. The picket on which he laid his hand, to throw the barrier open, was smooth.

"Somebody lives here, I'm sure," he said. "We'll soon find out."

They came to the down-tumbling "stoop" that answered for a porch, and Hakon knocked on the door. There was no response. After knocking three more times, with no better results, he looked at Ruth gravely, by the light that came from a flash of lightning. What he meant to say, however, was interrupted. A mighty tumult of thunder crashed in the sky, and down came a deluge of water.

With no further hesitation he put his shoulder to the door and turned the knob. The house had not been locked; the door opened at a touch.

"You can't stay out in this," said Hakon. "I'll light a match and we'll see where we are."

They entered together and closed the door. The match that Hakon ignited glared redly in a tiny hall, revealing a state of furnished disorder that might have meant almost anything—either abandonment of the place, or mere daily neglect on the part of the habitants. Into a dingy little room on his left Hakon led the way. His light was waning, and as yet no lamp had been discovered.

The match went out. The ensuing darkness was the more impenetrable and oppressive for the contrast with what had been but a moment before. Ruth put out her hands, and kept one lightly resting on Hakon's arm. He struck another match.

This time they returned to the hall and entered a room farther back. Here, on a table, stood a candle, which Hakon lighted.

The room was, if possible, more dingy than the

other. In a corner stood a bed, clean and smooth, but littered with newspapers, scattered in profusion on its cover.

For a moment neither Ruth nor Hakon spoke. Then he said: "There is no one about."

Ruth answered: "It isn't as pretty as our first little house—the place where we ate our lunch. . . . And hear it rain!"

Not only could they hear a furious assault of the drops on the roof, but the roar and crack of the storm were increasing momentarily.

Hakon said: "I wonder how far it is to the railroad station or the next house down the road."

"Why?" inquired Ruth. "You wouldn't think of our walking in the rain?"

"Not you, certainly not," he answered.

She looked at him with eyes grown large and startled.

"But—you wouldn't leave me here, alone, in a house like this?" she said. "I don't see how you—"

"Ruth," he said, "you know how much I love you. But we can't remain here together."

His directness always returned at such a moment as this.

They stood there, with the candle between them, looking each other fairly and steadily in the eyes. To Ruth it seemed an eon since he had spoken of his love before. His words now sent her pulses leaping madly. All the rain in the world could not have quenched her joy. The day had awakened a hundred new sprites of love and passion in her being. Her mind was daily becoming accustomed to the thought that she was Hakon's wife. Now, however, she was in a tumult of emotions, all at conflict.

"I couldn't remain here alone," she repeated.

"You couldn't leave me. We haven't done anything to bring this about. It couldn't be helped. If you go away in the rain—I'm going too. . . . I am your wife, dear, after all."

He was baffled. His nature was leaping exultantly; his stern, implacable reason flung it back in savage might.

"But—we couldn't proclaim our secret from such a predicament as this," he said. "We couldn't do it. The look of it—"

Ruth became very pale.

"And you said you had to keep it all a secret—or be ruined, politically," she said.

"That wouldn't count!" he declared, vehemently. "That is the least of my worries."

"I couldn't let you do it," answered Ruth. "I couldn't. . . . I don't know what we're going to do."

The storm outside became terrific.

"You are brave enough to stay here alone," he said. "I know you are brave enough for that. And yet—I don't see how a man could leave his wife in a place like this—a prey to anything that came—Ruth, help me out."

She stood for a moment irresolute. Then she came towards him and halted so near that when she raised her face he could feel the movement of the air she was breathing. She placed her hands lightly on his shoulders. A sweeter gesture of sacred surrender could not have been conceived. She touched him simply, with neither guile nor anything save natural impulse in her heart. In her helplessness she responded to the dictates of the Fates and her own divinely given emotion.

Hakon's whole being was aflame. To know that she loved him so deeply made his senses reel, his

eyes grow blind to everything save the beauty of her upturned face. The cry of his nature was to take the offered kiss; his starving hands were gripped till they ached in their struggle to fly up to hers. But just the flicker of a timid look, that came in her glance, restored his control.

"No, no!" he said. "Not yet — not yet — my precious wife!"

He backed away, smiling at her faintly, from a distance that seemed to him and to her a hundred miles in width.

Her hands fell down at her sides. She averted her eyes at last and looked at the candle. Not even the fearful cannonading outside impressed itself upon her hearing for the moment. But a blinding flash that seemed to make incandescent all the world, descried from the one small window, served to hurl her once again upon the present, with its oddly patterned facts.

"Let me walk beside you, in the storm," she begged, quietly. "I'd be afraid to stay here, all by myself. I haven't got that kind of courage. And the storm may abate."

"I shouldn't have taken you to-day," said Hakon. "I can't leave you here; and we can't both remain; and, now, if we walk off together, it's going to be late when we arrive—anywhere. And we don't know where it will be, or how it may result—to your precious name. . . . To tell our secret then would be wretchedly lame."

He had only hinted before at the need for protecting her name. She blushed at the sound of his words as they came so directly.

"I'll do anything you say," she told him. "I wish to be worthy—when our day shall come."

Love surged upon him once more, in a tidal-wave that threatened to sweep all before it.

"I don't know what to—" he started, when something he heard outside, above the storm, distracted his thoughts abruptly.

"I thought I heard—some one—something," he said, pausing between his words to listen. "Yes—I'm sure there's some one coming."

He took up the candle and left the room, Ruth closely following behind. They went thus to a door at the rear, which he opened. The wind flung in and the candle sang, as its flame clung bluely to the wick. Then out of the wrack of darkness and rain came the form of a woman, middle-aged and poorly dressed, who sped towards the lighted shelter of her house with a cry of surprise.

A moment later she slammed the door behind her, and threw off a shawl, in which her head had been wrapped, revealing a somewhat thin and wrinkled countenance beneath a tangle of gray and unkempt hair, which she raked from before her two sharp eyes with her bony hand.

"Well," she exclaimed, "don't it look like rain! And me in the shed there, waitin' fer it to take its breath, and then I seen a light in my own house. And who be ye, anyhow?"

"We went by, an hour ago, in an automobile," Hakon hastened to explain. "It broke down, and the rain came on, and so we hastened back here for shelter. There was no one in, so I lighted a candle."

"And made yourselves to home," completed the woman. "Well, don't it look like rain! An autermorebeene! Won't it git kind of spoiled, or melted, or somethin', out in the storm? Set down. Come

in and set down. I s'pose you're regular rich. You didn't think this was no hotel?"

"No," said Hakon. "We didn't take time to think. Our first idea was to get in out of the wet."

"Jest like me, running back from the wood-pile, to git to the shed," replied the woman, leading the way to the room which her visitors had entered first. "I suppose you'd like to stop around here all night?"

Hakon replied with a question: "How far is the nearest railway station?"

"As the crow flies, it's seven miles," replied the hostess. "When you walk, it's 'bout 'leven. And I reckon with mud on your feet it's 'bout two hun'red. You wasn't thinkin' of walkin'?"

"Perhaps I could hire a horse," replied Hakon. "If you've got one—"

"Ain't got no horse ner cow, except a dog—and he ain't home," interrupted the housewife, briskly. "Up to Yeager's they might have theirs around, if he ain't been borrowed to Plunkett's. But that's as far as the station. I ain't got no room fer ye nohow. But you must be regular rich."

Hakon had been standing. He now sat down. The prospect of getting Ruth to the station was anything but promising. Nevertheless, he did not entirely relinquish his hope.

"What time does the next train go to New York?" he inquired.

"There ain't no more trains, not to-day," announced the woman, smoothing out her dress, and once more lifting her hair from before her visage. "Sometimes human bein's goes on the milk-cars, at twelve o'clock in the night."

"Then there is a milk-train?" Hakon asked, with

a gleam of hope. "I could catch that, perhaps, by walking?"

"And the lady, too?" demanded the woman. "I tell you it does look like rain!"

Ruth was still silent, permitting Hakon to do all the talking.

"I thought perhaps you might find room, some way—" started Hakon.

"And you'd go off and leave her?" interrupted the housewife, aggressively, scrutinizing Ruth for the twentieth time. "I see you're married. Was this your honeymoonin' tower?"

"Yes—we—we're married," Ruth confessed, in a faint utterance, finding denial impossible, with that plain gold ring still upon her finger and shining newly in the light of the candle. "But—this isn't exactly our honeymoon. We weren't married to-day."

"Oh," said the woman, raising her voice above the storm. "Well—don't it look like rain? I was goin' to say, Silas and Joe are both comin' home, and maybe Si wouldn't mind a-sleepin' in the shed, to accommodate a new-married couple, and then I wouldn't have to turn ye out in the mud."

"You are very kind," said Hakon. "If you could just manage to keep Miss—keep—my wife here for the night, I could catch that milk-train easily."

"Catch the milk-train?" echoed the woman. "Well—I wonder if my name is Boggs, the same as yistiddy! You ain't tryin' to git up no divorce, already?"

"Not at all," answered Hakon, who might have been amused under any other circumstances. "It is very important for me to get back to New York to-night, that's all."

"Oh," said Mrs. Boggs, "you never can tell 'bout these regular rich. Have you had your supper?"

Ruth spoke up, replying they had not.

"Well, lemme go look 'round the kitching," answered the housewife. She arose from her seat, but a crash of thunder, more terrific than any that had gone before, made her plump in her chair again with alacrity. However, she arose again, as the floods of water swept down upon the roof in renewed violence. "Well," she said, "don't it look like rain!" and she hastened at once from the room.

For the moment that followed her departure neither Ruth nor Hakon spoke. Then Ruth said:

"The secret is out. I didn't mean to keep the ring on all this time. . . . I don't see how I can let you go away, even now."

"Surely these are simple, honest people — this woman is," he answered. "What else can I do but to leave you here, and take that train myself?"

"She harps so much on the thought that we are rich," answered Ruth, in a whisper. "We haven't seen the men of the family. And you know some terrible things have happened to people in lonely places."

"But you must send me off," he answered, doggedly. "I mustn't remain. I can't. We've got to be courageous. We've got to do the best we can. I want you to help me. I'm sure these folk are honest. I know you'll tell me to go."

He stood up and paced the little room in his trouble —he wished to be stronger now than he had ever been in all his life.

"Yes," said Ruth, "all along I've known I ought to tell you to go. But—it's a very heavy storm. If anything happened to you—if I never see you again. . . . God bless you, dearest—please go."

She too had arisen. She was pressing both her hands against her heart.

"Thank you, little woman," he said. "I need all your help, for—I don't want to go."

The last hour had done much to wed their very thoughts.

"I know," she said, simply. "I'm afraid to have you start off in the storm, but—it's all right, I know." After a moment she added: "I want you to turn around for a minute, and—let me put my head on the back of your shoulder."

He permitted her to turn him about. The slight pressure, where she rested her cheek for the briefest time against the muscles of his arm, gave him emotions more tremendous than any he had ever known.

He could not see the wild joy that played across Ruth's features in that second; he could not realize the reluctance with which she shortened that moment of leaning upon him and feeling him tremble.

She had only gone back to her chair when their hostess returned.

"If you don't mind settin' in the kitching, why come along," she said. "We had our supper at half-past five, so we ain't got nuthin' fancy to make you sick."

The rain continued to fall with no apparent diminution during Hakon's frugal meal. Ruth ate almost nothing. She was far too excited, far too engrossed in keeping up her courage.

As Hakon was making ready to leave with an old, badly broken umbrella, kindly loaned by Mrs. Boggs, the men of the family came upon the scene.

Their honesty was apparent. The willingness with which the one called Si agreed to make himself a couch in the shed, restored Ruth's confidence at once.

Hakon had assured her he could make his way to the station in time for the milk-train easily. He also agreed to telegraph to Hobart, in one direction, and to Mrs. Hobart in the other, by way of informing them of what had occurred.

The storm showed no signs of abating when he turned up his coat collar as a final preparation to leave. He and Ruth had been left together in the tiny hall.

"Good-bye," she said. "I'm glad we had this day —some parts of it, anyway. If you can come back to-morrow, I shall be very happy."

"Good-night, beloved," he said, and he stepped forth into the blackness of the storm.

XXVIII

MRS. BOGGS had hardly underestimated the length of that highway to a man tracking heavily in mud. Hakon was more than three hours toiling along the road, fiercely beaten by the rain for an hour, then as fiercely assaulted by the wind that continued to buffet all the world till after midnight. His umbrella was puffed inside out before he had gone half a mile.

The way was exceedingly dark, for the sky was black, and not a light could be seen. More than once he stumbled from his path into dripping shrubbery that showered down a hoard of rain-drops at the touch of his hands or limbs, but he plodded doggedly along, his nature boyishly joyous at the roar of the trees in the warm, rough gale of wind.

The milk-train, when he came to the station, was delayed. He was able to send away his messages, after which he waited for an hour, meantime pacing up and down the track, in the wind that was drying his garments.

The ride to New York City, when at length the train came rumbling down the track, was only just barely more acceptable than walking. But Hakon was hardy. By the time he arrived at his own hotel, however, he was wearied to the last degree. Once asleep, he remained so, till nearly ten o'clock on the following day.

It was late that Sunday afternoon when at length he returned to the scene where he had left his disabled car. At the Boggs's abode there was one person only to be found, the man named Si. Hobart had come after Ruth in the morning, and Mrs. Boggs, with her husband, had gone to church, Sunday-school, and evening session, according to Si.

Inasmuch as the man refused to accept any payment for the trouble to which they had all been put, Hakon proceeded onward and repaired his car, toiling an hour to adjust that simple-looking spring, after which, as the day was so far advanced, he returned to New York over the road which he and Ruth had traversed so joyously together.

That Sunday evening Ruth and the others also returned to the city by the last of the evening trains. The house-warming plans had been somewhat blighted. Meantime, however, Mrs. Hobart's mother was quite herself again and all was well.

On coming to his office on Monday morning, Hakon found three scented letters from Clara Graystone, all very much of one tenor, since all expressed her bereavement of heart in his "prolonged and silent absence." He tossed these aside and looked about, as if for something he had expected to find. Then he presently realized there was not a word or a sign from Bertha Meshe, who nevertheless refused to be forgotten.

Mrs. Meshe, as a matter of fact, had busied herself with affairs which she deemed far more important than writing futile scoldings to a man who was proving reluctant. She had found herself annoyed by her lack of time in which to ascertain anything about the Hakon plans that Friday night when she sent her note, but having returned to town on Satur-

day, angered and resentful, she had soon discovered that, whatsoever Hakon's pleaded engagement might have been, he had not been engrossed by Graystone nor with Clara. Thereupon she had made a brisk but futile effort to discover where it was that he had spent the time for which she could make no accounting.

She had given up her investigations on Sunday night, to bide her time and work out devices more matured. Hakon had twice eluded the interviews she had offered, but time was long. In Mrs. Meshe's calendar there was one to-day in every year and 364 to-morrows. She had never yet gained anything worth the having in a moment; she was schooled in waiting and scheming. And Hakon! He should yet be glad to kneel at her feet and pay humble tribute for the hostages—honor and fair repute—left in the hands he dared antagonize! She knew her day would come to its dawn, but meantime a something of zest was added to her appetite by the fact that here was a man who was not to be caught too cheaply. Beneath the wrath that she felt at the thought that Hakon had so far resisted and outwitted her plans, lurked an admiration for his strength. The man excited as well as angered her passions. He was new to her ken; he was worthy of her arts.

With a score of tricks at command, Mrs. Meshe knew many ways in which to bring about preliminary steps to meet her ends. She was now aware that to write again to Hakon would be puerile. He was evidently wary; moreover, he had quite recovered from his fright—if fright it was—which had come when she, Bertha, mentioned the possibility of a prompt, clandestine marriage with Clara. Doubtless he had learned, from Graystone himself, that

no such scheme was afoot, or even projected. She calmly agreed, to herself, that he had doubtless caught her in a lie. This supplied all the more reason for breaking his pride and making a conquest of his nature. Any man should know enough never to learn that a woman has lied.

But the fact that he did know—which he must, since otherwise he would certainly have met her, to learn the result of her promised interview with Graystone—this would account for the further fact that he was now particularly shy. Well, she desired to see him—no matter where. She wished to meet him face to face, if only to make a moment's study of his mood, which would certainly show through any mask he might assume upon his face. A summons from Graystone, at his office, would answer. Hakon would come for that. That Graystone would be present at any such meeting as her plan embraced would make but little difference. The main point was to see the man—and trust to her something, perhaps her intuition, for a cue.

It therefore came to pass that Graystone telephoned to Hakon's office, just before noon that Monday morning, requesting Hakon to appear in the pivot-room of power at three. The matter was one that brooked no delay. Hakon replied he would appear.

At one o'clock a tiny parcel came from Ruth, together with a note. The letter read:

"Beloved, the little locket you will find in the package is one I had hoped to give you Saturday, but it only came this morning. Every moment of our day was precious to me, except the one in which you went away. My heart got very wet, traipsing with you through the rain. After all, even that moment of your brave going was also dear. How well

we got to know each other, didn't we? I wish I could write what I want to write. You couldn't have come to any harm that night, for I prayed harder than the wind blew, and faster than the rain could fall. Do you know why? I am being as patient as I can. I have put my hands on this piece of paper just as you must put yours, when you hold it. My hands are getting rebellious. Sometime we'll have thirty-one of our days every month—even in February. I think Mrs. Hobart would be pleased to have you call. Yours,

"RUTH."

The locket was a tiny golden disk that was opened with difficulty, revealing a small but excellent picture of Ruth, whose radiant beauty was there, in all save the coloring. The eyes were gazing straight into Hakon's. In the opposite side of the golden shell the four letters necessary to spell out "Ruth" were engraved. A small disk of paper fell to his desk and lay unnoticed for a moment. When Hakon picked it up he read: "If you like it, I hope you'll sometimes wear it on your chain."

His hand sought his watch-chain at once. But he paused in the action of placing the trinket in a place so conspicuous. It might be as well to postpone the pleasure until after the visit to Graystone's headquarters down Broadway.

When he attempted to close the locket, he found it even more stubbornly resisting than it had been when first he coaxed it open. He therefore looked at the tiny picture once again, long and eagerly, after which he snapped the sides together and turned to read Ruth's letter anew.

Until after the interview with his chief should be at an end, he could not know what hours of the day to call his own. He therefore refrained from writing to Ruth to tell her when to expect him to call upon the Hobarts.

THE ULTIMATE PASSION

At a little after two he left his den and walked nearly all the way down New York's great arterial street, with its wholesale houses so closely shouldering for room, and its lofty insurance and commercial buildings, increasing in number and importance, towards the little—the head-end of the island.

When he came at length into the sanctum from which Amos Graystone directed colossal affairs of politics and business, Hakon was finely self-possessed. Therefore it was that the sight of Mrs. Meshe at Graystone's side was not in the least disturbing to his mien. He had never appeared more proud or self-reliant in his life.

Mrs. Meshe paid a mental acknowledgment to his manhood and his poise. She said to herself:

"The iceberg! And handsome as the sun!"

XXIX

GRAYSTONE was a very busy man this morning. He had only yielded to pressure, on the part of Mrs. Meshe, in summoning Hakon hither, for when troubles threatened he always felt that he could handle them better unaided than he could with too many assistants. And Mrs. Meshe had informed him there were troubles.

The man who assumes the rôle of greatness finds himself no longer enabled to stand entirely alone, or even wholly on his own two feet. His human dependents, paradoxically enough, are more or less supports on whom he leans, perforce. Therefore it is that treachery is always possible, always threatened. The supports may always be removed.

Mrs. Meshe had never been a traitor to Graystone as yet, but she knew her power, and a creature capable of what she was doing every day was capable of anything. To-day, merely for the purpose of seeing Hakon, even here, in the presence of his chief, she had cleverly invented a story to the effect that an old-time acquaintance of Hakon's had chanced upon the fact that his real support, in all these presidential rumors, was centred in the great commercial interests typified by the Wall Street giants and the trusts. She wanted a letter, she said, from Hakon to this former acquaintance, denying this statement. Graystone, working more keenly to

land Hakon in the White House than he had worked for anything in years, had readily responded to the woman's demands.

In his way of brutal directness he explained to Hakon what the situation was in the light of Bertha Meshe's fabrications.

"I don't propose to lose this trick on account of any loose-tongued idiots," he said, in conclusion. "I've staked too much on making you president; I've put in too much time. If our Cleveland correspondent reports a leak, it's got to be plugged. Is there a man named Riley who knows anything about your present connections?"

"I used to know Riley very well," answered Hakon, for Mrs. Meshe had acquainted herself with the names of all his old associates. "I haven't heard from the man for at least three years."

"Any edge on the fellow?" demanded Graystone. "Got any ears and eyes?"

Hakon replied: "He was keen enough three years ago, but more like an acid than a knife."

"I know the breed!" said Graystone. "Rather pull down an ex-reformer than to catch a whole parcel of thieves. But he'll keep his hands off my ex-reformer till after election, if we have to chop his arms off up to his neck. Here's a type-written letter you can sign."

Hakon, already smarting under the appellation "ex-reformer," took the letter which Graystone thrust towards his hand, and read it through.

It was addressed to the Riley who had once been an echo of himself in voicing the need for national decency. It was a plain, brief statement to the effect that he, Hakon, was still on the side of purity and the great elements, working for the solidarity

of the commonwealth and the maintenance of its glorious institutions of justice, equality, liberty, and the divine rights of manhood. It denied that he, Hakon, would ever be subservient to the moneyed interests, and declared that, if the people of this glorious country saw fit to repose their confidence in himself as their chief executive, he would more than justify their expectations.

That the whole affair was a fraud, only Mrs. Meshe was aware. She had no intention that Hakon's letter, or her letter rather, signed with his name, should ever escape from her custody. To Hakon, however, as well as to Graystone, the matter was real enough. Certain broad equivocations in the letter, as a matter of fact, were Graystone's suggestions. The art of them could not escape Hakon's sharpened faculties. But to him, resolved as he was to repudiate all agreements with Graystone, should the coming election find him named for president, this letter meant more than it could to any one else in the world. The things that were promised in those type-written lines would be performed. The thing was not at all an idle deceit—it was more like a confession of what he meant to do—and here it was, emanating from the very office of Graystone himself.

A more concentrated epitome of double dealing could hardly have been found. Hakon, somewhat ashamed of his connection with any of it, had gone too far to quibble now. He wondered how deeply he could steep himself in this sort of thing before the road should end. He had chosen a treachery to Graystone rather than permit a treachery to his country, but what was it that had come upon his conscience to render even this much double dealing possible?

"You want me to sign this and send it to Riley?" he inquired.

"You sign it; I'll send it," answered Mrs. Meshe. "I wish to time its arrival with the word I shall send to our Cleveland correspondent."

"Sign it and get it over!" said Graystone. "We've perhaps lost one delegation we thought we had fixed already, and we've got to meet the deficiency or buy those scoundrels back again. Sign it—sign it! I want to get rid of you both."

Hakon signed the sheet and Graystone took it. He read it twice over, on each occasion with a single glance. After that he could have repeated every word of it, even two weeks later.

"I'll wire Robinson it's on the way," said he. "A sour spot in Ohio could ruin everything."

Mrs. Meshe began to comprehend how very much, indeed, it meant to her chief to win this fight. She did not know—since none of his tools ever did—how much of his own money and effort he was putting into the game, nor that his personal desire in the matter far outweighed the vast commercial interest which he shared in common with his business kind, and which was actuating the silent undermining of the nation's sovereign will.

Mrs. Meshe had not expected to find the man so wrought upon by her hint at a troublesome complication. She knew that she must block the telegram with the writing of which Graystone was already engaged.

"I'll send your wire myself," she said. "Robinson may be in Akron this afternoon. I'll know at five."

Graystone concluded his message promptly. He gave it to Hakon. "Read it," he said. "See if it isn't all right."

Mrs. Meshe regarded Hakon keenly as he scanned

the telegram, wet with Graystone's ink. As yet the meeting had brought her no cue as to what her own next step would be. Her pique had increased. The healthy, vital atmosphere that fairly surrounded John Hakon excited her nature, brought a flush of color to her face, and fired a light of boldness in her eyes. She was fairly infatuated with the man, she knew not and cared not why.

Now, as she studied his demeanor once more, in a desperate resolve to conquer his pride and reluctance, let the cost be what it might, her eye was attracted to the telegram that he was reading. The words themselves conveyed but little, either to her or to Hakon. There was nothing particularly significant in the message, but she saw that Hakon's gaze was fixed on what appeared to be the least important part of the scribbling—the frank-sign and number in the lower left-hand corner, by which Graystone dead-headed all his messages.

Hakon was looking with particular interest at these hieroglyphics, concerning which he might have thought nothing had it not been for Breeme's explanations when those other political "documents" had been in evidence. What the message imparted he cared but little. He noted Graystone's initials at the bottom and returned the sheet.

Mrs. Meshc, in the mean time, had suddenly come upon the very hint for which she had planned this entire meeting. She, too, knew the look of that franking number and the potency of those initials. She took the message calmly from Graystone's hand and placed it, with the Hakon letter, in a book that she held on her arm.

"I'll get these off as soon as possible," she said. "Is there anything more?"

"Nothing but for both of you to leave me in peace," said Graystone. "Better come around, John, and keep up a speaking acquaintance with Clara. I shall soon require more of your time myself. Bertha, sit down."

She had risen when Hakon rose to go. Graystone had no intention of permitting the pair to depart together.

" 'Bye, John," he added, and Hakon was glad to escape.

Mrs. Meshe waited, while nearly ten minutes passed in silence.

Graystone was busily working at his customary budget of letters. After a time he rang for one of his secretaries. At the same moment he said:

"That's all. You can go and get busy yourself."

Mrs. Meshe laughed. "Heavenly cross-patch," she said. Stepping behind him for a second she rumpled his thin, gray hair with a vigorous hand and left it standing on end. Then she went, tossing him a kiss from the door.

Later in that same afternoon the inevitable newspaper reporter found Hakon at last. Exciting news of his remarkable strength and progress as a presidential candidate had come from the West, and with his picture in print, and tremendously significant rumors afloat, he was abruptly become an object of national interest.

With commendable skill he fought off the man who, as Graystone had warned him, would make him say things, howsoever silent he might insist upon being. When the man had finally departed, he 'phoned at once to headquarters.

"They were sure to nab you sometime," answered Graystone, after exploiting a few private curses.

"You'll have to change your office and keep out of sight all you can."

Nevertheless, when the evening paper appeared, not only Hakon, but Graystone as well, felt a certain sense of gratification in the knowledge that Brevoort's possible failure to receive the nomination when the convention should meet would occasion no very great surprise in circles where the information was the most reliable.

The boom had commenced. Graystone, however, toiled with might and main to restore the secrecy and privacy in which he was conducting the vitally important features of the fight. The open predictions that Hakon would be the next president stirred up the greatest excitement, not only in his veins, but also in those of Ruth and of Clara Graystone.

XXX

IT was not until certain work in New York had been completed and Graystone had directed her to leave once more for Washington that Bertha Meshe employed the device by which she knew another meeting with Hakon could be achieved. This occurred on the following afternoon. Hakon had already moved to a new office, the address of which she knew.

Instead of leaving for the National Capital at three o'clock, as instructed from headquarters, she remained at home till nearly five, and then sent a wire to Hakon, in duplicate, one to his hotel, the other to his new address.

"I want to see you, eight to-night, at —— Central Park West," was what she wrote.

To this she signed Graystone's initials. The message was likewise deadheaded, since she used the franking-sign which Graystone had caused to be respected.

The message that went to Hakon's new office was not delivered; the one at the hotel desk was delayed. He had left his work early in the afternoon for the double purpose of escaping more reporters and searching for a book that he very much desired before proceeding further with his writing; or so,

at least, he told himself. The fact of the matter was that an affirmative note from Ruth, replying to one of his own in which he had asked if she would be at home that evening, had rendered work impossible and his office too confining. His search for the book in a dingy old shop was in the nature of a compromise with himself. He felt that he was holding no check on his boyish excitement these days; that he was losing all capacity for serious employment. That he did not find the volume in question failed to distress him in the least. Other old tomes he examined at the dealer's, but even then the pages that he scrutinized returned to his gaze only blurred and type-freckled images of Ruth's beloved face, even as his fingers constantly strayed to the tiny locket now hanging on his chain.

Avoiding his favorite thoroughfare, he walked at last up Fourth Avenue, somewhat dreamily. Saturday afternoon was the one thing in his mind—last Saturday afternoon and evening—that had meant so much to himself and Ruth. The time seemed strangely long since then.

Two things projected into his thoughts to mar an otherwise delightful reverie. One was a hazy dubiety concerning Mrs. Meshe; the other was an increasing disgust that accompanied every recollection of Clara Graystone, on whom he had called the previous evening.

In addition to his own self-debasement, which the predicament thrust upon him, Clara's increasing frivolity, duplicity, and blandishments were steadily becoming more and more insupportable. To be obliged to receive her kisses, and at the same time to deny himself even the smallest caress to or from Ruth, was galling to the last degree, and none the

less so because he felt he doubtless deserved some such punishment for what he was doing. He dared not think of the hour in which, perhaps, Ruth must be made aware of all he had committed; he fled from all speculation as to what she would think should the truth be revealed to her trusting intelligence.

Despite all the shadows that lurked in the last little corners of his brain, however, he was warm with happiness. Since that parting with Ruth, a thousand thoughts of the all which that crisis in the rain had meant to them both had crowded in upon him, each of them bringing him joy. How she would seem to-night, since she too must have dwelt upon similar thoughts, he could only imagine from the stand-point of how he wished her to seem. He was beginning to entertain a hope that she loved him for himself alone, as much as she might for all that she hoped he would possibly be made by the national game of politics.

He was still in this mood after eating his dinner. When he dressed for the visit to the Hobart house he held his watch-chain, with the locket open, in his hand, conscious of a riot of feeling in his veins.

A knock on the door, by the boy who had brought the belated telegram, aroused Hakon sharply. He slipped the chain in his waistcoat, with the locket closed but not snapped tightly together, as he went to answer the knock. Receiving the telegram with a slight premonition of dread, he tore it open. It was Mrs. Meshe's forgery.

He read it twice as he slowly returned down the room. Then he placed it on his table, face upward, and read it again, as he slipped on his coat, squared it about his collar, and adjusted the sleeves about his cuffs.

He had half a mind to ignore this command, which he willingly accepted as coming from Graystone himself. He was angered first, then disappointed. He should be obliged to wire Ruth of his inability to come, after all. Yet he went on preparing to leave, as if the trend of his will had not as yet been altered.

When he glanced in his glass, to be sure of the set of his tie, he realized abruptly that the meeting with Graystone required no niceties of dressing. Nevertheless, he would go as he was. Possibly Graystone would conclude his interview early, in which event the visit to Ruth might still be made at a slightly later hour.

As he came through the hotel office he halted for a moment before the telegraph-booth, then went on. It was nearly eight already. He would send no message to Ruth, but would hasten away, finish the interview with Graystone, and make his excuses at the Hobarts', if he found himself arriving there particularly late.

There were many cabs at the hotel door when he presently emerged upon the street. He took the first one available, gave the address to the driver, and was whisked away at a rapid pace.

When at length the hansom came to a halt in Central Park West, Hakon looked doubtfully at the house before which he had arrived. It was quite dark. There was not a sign of life in or about it. He scanned the number on the crumpled telegram, to make himself certain there had been no mistake, then stepped out, paid his man, and dismissed him.

Making certain that the number on the darkened house corresponded with the one on his paper, and

hoping to find that Graystone had made a mistake, rendering the meeting impossible, he rang the bell.

A colored maid opened the door almost at once. The hall behind her was dimly lighted; the glass of the transom and entrance had been masked. A score of polished surfaces glistened dully, but richly, in the softened glow.

Hakon made no move to enter. He still retained the impression that there must be some mistake.

"Please come in, Mr. Hakon," said the maid. "You all bin expected."

Even then the man had no suspicion of where he was, or of what it signified. Graystone, he reflected, might own a dozen houses, or might have summoned him here to confer with some of his wealthy associates.

He followed the maid to a room at the rear which was lighted, but deserted. The door was closed behind him quietly.

Advancing as far as a small onyx table, particularly simple and beautiful, he stood with his hat in his hand, awaiting further developments, and noting the rich appointments of the place. Instinctively he felt annoyed at the mystery, the peculiar manner which Graystone had adopted for the meeting. The apartment, moreover, was quite incongruous as a haunt for Graystone, at least in any of the characteristics he had revealed to Hakon.

The red lamp, gorgeous in its coloring and workmanship, yet casting a soft and mellow light on the rich divan in the corner, smacked of— Hakon halted in his speculations, as a partial divination of the truth crept slowly athwart his reason.

The door behind him was opened. He turned, expecting to see Amos Graystone in a smoking-jacket

and slippers—more at home here than in his daughter's dwelling.

Instead he beheld a figure of dazzling beauty and voluptuousness, in whom, for a moment, he failed to recognize Bertha Meshe.

She was dressed in a clinging garment, half robe, half kimono, thin as gauze, resplendent with embroideries of exquisite beauty and coloring. In her hair was a single red rose. At her corsage were three. These latter, like her splendid arms and neck, were revealed through the veiling of her draperies. What manner of skirt it was that she wore was not precisely evident, but the substance of it blended artfully with all the reds and purples of the veiling kimono, concealing, yet more than suggesting every line and rounded contour of her figure.

A goddess arrayed for a Roman saturnalia could have been no more resplendent, no more languorously intoxicating. Her eyes, half closed and full of slow, deep fire, were fixed on Hakon's face. Her chin was slightly elevated. On her lips played a smile as elusively suggestive as her raiment.

Hakon stared at her silently. His surprise was complete. Then, for a second, he believed she had made some slight miscalculation. She must have come into the room expecting to find Graystone. It was Graystone's house—and hers. Superbly attired as she was, she must have expected—

Her voice, low, distinct, surcharged with intensity, interrupted his hurried cogitations.

"I am glad you have come," she said. She still stood there, looking upon him from her slumberous eyes.

Hakon remained motionless by the table. Thoughts in tumult flung in chaos through his mind, and only

the large, shameless facts made distinct impressions. He realized the all that it meant only by making a special endeavor.

"Do you mean—" he started.

"Yes," she answered, candidly. "I sent the telegram myself. Gray isn't here. He won't be here."

She came forward slowly. Hakon still made no movement. She put out her hand and pressed it lightly against his cheek and lips, only for a second, then she turned about, went to the door silently, and locking it, removed the key and placed it in the corsage of her dress.

Hakon, helplessly at sea a moment before, was suddenly in calm possession of his strength and faculties. It was a superhuman calm, as unexpected as it was assured. It had come from — he knew not whither.

"I wanted to have a talk with you—another talk," she confessed, in her rich, caressing voice. "Come and sit down, and be comfortable."

She threw him one look from her eyes as she went to the silken divan beneath the large red lamp.

Hakon stubbornly remained beside the onyx table. He recognized a certain need for diplomacy, for the locking of the door had not escaped his attention, nor did the significance of her move belittle itself in his estimation. He knew, however, that every point surrendered now would count against his position. He drew a chair close to the table and seated himself coolly, facing Mrs. Meshe, who had sunk in a graceful pose upon the cushions in her corner.

"I haven't very much to talk about," he said.

"Oh yes, we have," she corrected. "Quite a number of things. But we don't wish to talk across

the room. Come." Her voice was that of a siren and a goddess in one.

Hakon was on the point of obeying, despite his resolution. Her subtle influence embraced him, drew him from himself. Yet he fought off the drunkenness attacking his senses and remained where he was for a time sufficiently long to provoke her to repeat her summons.

"Jack," she said, softly, "come."

He had never responded to the name of Jack. He disliked the name. She had made a mistake. His calmness returned reinforced.

"Whose house is this?" he demanded.

She answered, as if in surprise: "Why—mine."

"Yes; but who pays the rent?" he insisted. "Graystone?"

She laughed. "When he doesn't forget. But he won't even drive by the door to-night. He thinks I'm in Washington." She made this admission enticingly, and altogether to still the alarm which she thought might be lurking in the breast of her visitor.

He had felt no such alarm as she imagined, hence her admission scored as a point against herself. He turned the matter over in his mind rapidly, in order the better to employ any slight advantage that it placed in his hands.

Mrs. Meshe mistook his silence. "Do come over here," she coaxed, alluringly. "We shall be hoarse if we go on shouting across space like this, and I've got quite a lot to say."

"I haven't," he said. "I can manage very well from here." He dared not yield to her wish, and thereby start to surrender his defences, one by one. He even realized, in the calm he forced to abide in his blood, that the woman was superb.

Well aware that she was losing the first small point, yet convinced of her powers and of the advantage frequently resulting from seeming to yield to a stronger will, she arose and came to where he was, bringing three of her cushions. These she placed on the floor beside his chair. When she sat upon them and looked up with an almost childlike wistfulness in her wonderful eyes, she had won back all that she had lost by conceding his momentary mastery.

"Tyrant," she murmured. "I have obeyed your will. I abase myself at your feet," and she drew her fingers across the patent leather of his shoe.

Hakon grasped for his calmness as a drowning man would grasp at a plank.

"Then, since you have become obedient," he said, "you may give me that key to the door."

Instantly impatience came upon her.

"Why don't you let me be a friend?" she demanded. "You don't know the half I've got to say. Don't you know that it is *I* who am making your fight? *I* who will make you president? Graystone couldn't do it without me. You can't have it without me. I want you to have it. I am working for you to have it as I never worked for anything in all my life. And I haven't asked you to marry a scrawny, silly woman, whom you hate. And I am the only one who can make you president in spite of Gray. That's what I got you here for, to tell you that I can and will, without your making yourself a slave to him!"

"You got me to this house," said Hakon, "to this house—Graystone's house—to tell me this?"

"I don't like the house," she retorted, passionately. "I'm tired and sick of the house. Get one you like better, and I'll go to it—and make you president

over Graystone's head! What do you need to care for him, when once you're elected? You can't endure that Clara. You are a man—just as I am a woman—and you *must* rebel! You *must* have wine instead of water! You *must* have strength to welcome strength! You *must* throw off the yoke of slavery and be human!"

She was panting; she had risen to her knees, and in her gesturing had torn aside her filmy robe, revealing the warm, white beauty of her heaving bosom—the whiter by contrast with the roses with their velvet cheeks upon her flesh. Her eyes were afire with resentment, passion, youth, vitality. She was fairly magnificent; and Hakon's physical self acknowledged her perfection. His calmness and self-control, however, were strengthened by the very abandonment of her attitude.

"I have done all the trading I shall do," he said. "If I never become president, what of it?"

"What of it?" she repeated, dumfounded for the moment at such an unexpected answer. "What of it!" and she laughed, while her busy mind rent the situation to pieces in search of the argument she needed in the crisis. "Oh, nothing!—nothing!" she said. "Only—how will it sound when your friends all know that you traded, then backed out again, leaving your promises behind you to prove that you tried the game and had no nerve for going on—for anything?"

It came as a threat. Hakon knew that he lay somewhat in her power, so far as his rôle of finer manhood was concerned. He knew she was perfectly capable of advertising the whole transaction to the world; that she would glory in such a revenge. His face was very white. He was thinking of Ruth—and of how it would sound to her.

"I want to be friends," said Mrs. Meshe, moving closer. "I got you here on a trick. I admit it. Think how much I wanted you to come."

Her voice was soft and caressing again. Her eyes were softer than her voice, and thrice more impassioned, when she turned their fires upon him. She was glowing with animal magnetism. She was weaving a spell on Hakon's senses. He dared not wholly provoke her; he dared not yield to the madness of her plans.

He said, as if by inspiration: "How long have you been friends with Graystone?"

"Oh, why bring Graystone in so constantly?" she demanded, half in anger again. "Can't you think of anything but Graystone?"

"Yes, I can think of myself in Graystone's place—and just such a moment as this arriving some day," he said.

It stung her. The accusation of it was unanswerable. She refused the issue and turned upon him with a new attack.

"You're afraid!" she said. "You lack the force I thought you had! You despise that Clara, and I know it. You told me so the last time we met—told me in spite of yourself—by every look on your face. What is it then? What is the obstacle? I have never been ugly nor vulgar. It cannot be that—nor Clara. Do you love some other woman?"

Hakon turned scarlet in a second. But, confused as he was, he was thoroughly aroused, thoroughly angered. To hear this creature at his feet defile all womankind, and particularly Ruth, by such an innuendo as the word "love" meant when it came from her lips, fired red-hot indignation in the man's better nature.

He started to make a sharp retort, scorching in its irony and fierce denunciation of the woman's guilt, but he suddenly realized two things: first, that such a giving way would be but a weakness; second, that as yet this woman held, symbolically and materially, the key to the whole situation.

A thousand thoughts rushed headlong through his mind before he selected a plain denial, that should also be an equivocation.

He said: "No, there is no such woman," and he meant there was no such woman as Mrs. Meshe implied.

"No such woman," she repeated, more quietly again. "I don't know whether to believe you or not. If there isn't any such woman, then why not be friends?" and she laid her hand across his knee engagingly. "If there's no one else but Clara, why—" and she halted abruptly.

Hakon looked down quickly. She was staring at the locket on his chain. By some peculiar fatalism the two halves, not tightly snapped together, slowly parted, till the tiny photograph of Ruth was wholly uncovered. He raised his hand, instinctively, to guard the precious token, but Mrs. Meshe was quicker.

She caught the locket in her fingers and looked at it searchingly, with jealousy and cunning swiftly crystallizing in her gaze.

"Ruth," she said, reading the name engraved on the concave surface of gold. "Ruth? Then—there is another woman, after all?"

Hakon stood up abruptly, and Mrs. Meshe nearly fell.

"We are verging on personalities that have no bearing on a strictly political conversation," he said. "I came here, of course, to discuss any business

affairs which you have in mind. Pray let us finish, after which you will, of course, open the door that was locked merely to prevent the possible entrance of the servants."

"No other woman," said Bertha, laughing softly, as a tigress might have laughed. "No other woman," and she stretched out her beautiful arms in a gesture languid and graceful. "Well—and suppose there is? Can she make you president?"

Hakon had never in his life been more ready to curse and repudiate the whole disgusting ambition which had brought him to this. But to cast it all down at the feet of this lying, false-promising woman, to disrobe himself, politically, here, and accept the shame, the utter humiliation, from the hands of Graystone's tool—it could not be done! He must wage a subtler fight than this. He made no reply; he simply stared at the woman before him in a cold, stern way that blighted the passion in her veins.

"Come, come!" she cried, losing her temper. "You are morally engaged to be married to Clara. Suppose I tell Graystone of this?" and she pointed to the locket angrily.

"Well," said Hakon, coldly, "suppose you do? What of it? How can you tell him?"

He had scored again, and she knew it. How could she even approach the subject to Graystone without revealing her own perfidy? He had struck even better than he realized for a moment. Then he felt he had gained a very distinct advantage.

The woman was softness again in an instant. She smiled at him superbly. She held her arms towards him in a gesture of abandon.

"I only wish to be friends," she said. "Ask me for what you will."

"Thank you," he said, in his reconstructed calm. "I'd like that key."

"What for?" she cried, impatiently. "We haven't finished talking."

"You had something more to say about the political situation, perhaps?" he inquired. "The hour is growing late. Doubtless you can finish in a moment, and—open the door so that the servants may enter, if necessity should arise."

"Well, now—and if I shouldn't open it—what then?" she said. "Of course you could take the key away from me—if you tried. Would you care to try?"

"I could never so far forget myself as to take anything away from a lady," he answered. "There will be no need, I am sure. When you have finished with all the political—"

"Oh, political!" she flung out, angrily. "Let's not lie. I don't wish to talk of politics any more to-night."

"Then nothing remains but for me to say good-evening," said Hakon, who had taken up his hat.

"Really?" she said, with one of her prettiest coquetries of manner. "Let's sit down to a quiet talk of something else."

She was humbling herself where she had expected to sway him with threat or enticement or any masterful art save this.

He smiled in a grim, sardonic manner. "Not this evening," he said.

Her resentment flared up hotly once again. He was beating her. Anger was a tribute she was paying to his mastery. Once more she thought of a threat.

"Suppose I don't let you go—all night?" she said. "You know how that would look."

He glanced quickly about the room. The second door, that led to another portion of the house, was doubtless secure. The one window, heavily curtained, looked out upon—he knew not what. To break it and drop himself down to the ground would be anything save a dignified escape, particularly if an officer of the law chanced to be passing.

Like a caged animal for a moment, almost ready to strangle the woman before him, he thought of a hundred futile expedients in half a minute. Then a counter threat came abruptly to his mind.

"No," he said, calmly, "it wouldn't look—conventional—to say the least—especially to Graystone."

Mrs. Meshe turned pale for a second herself. She had given the man much credit, but now she gave him more. In one glare of electric cerebration she depicted herself, repudiated by Hakon and flung away by the man she was willing to betray. She caught at one weak straw.

"Of course—Gray wouldn't find it out," she said, trying to laugh. "Everybody else in the town would know of it before he found it out."

"On the contrary," said Hakon, "he would be the first to whom I should relate the night's adventures."

She paled again. She could make nothing of such a man as this. He saw his advantage. He pressed it immediately.

"I know there will be no necessity for Graystone or any one to know that I was here," he said. "I know you will give me the key."

"I won't!" she cried, in the weakness of her baffled rage. "I won't!"

"Yes you will," he corrected, taking out his watch and softening his own voice, so that it sounded as if a velvet utterance concealed something harder than

steel. "In thirty seconds, by the watch, you will give me the key."

The way he said it awed the woman. Nevertheless, she laughed in her last defiance. She could not avoid the look in his eyes, the icy, mesmerizing glitter that had come to the surface of those deep-set orbs of bluish gray.

Her will power struggled. The conflict between her volition and his waged the more fiercely for the silence in which he continued to command her gaze.

"Fifteen seconds have gone," he said, in that same even utterance, sinister in its soft, compelling cadence. "You will give me that key in fifteen seconds more."

She tried to disengage her faculties; she tried again to laugh. His dominant will held her prisoner; she saw not a thing of his face, save his eyes. The watch he held he did not examine. Its ticking could be plainly heard.

"Five seconds more," he presently murmured. "Give me the key."

She made a sudden movement with her hand and snatched the key from her dress. A sound—half snarl, half cry—came from her lips. She dashed the key to the floor at his feet, and he bent and caught it up.

"Oh, Lord! I only locked it for your sake!" she said, viciously. "I've no wish to keep you, *with the other woman waiting*. Suppose we say good-night."

That her mood was one in which she was capable of doing him any possible injury, Hakon was fully aware. He was almost tempted to remain for the moment necessary to soften her feelings. But the insult with which she had roused all his anger made

any actual thought of temporizing out of the question absolutely.

"Good-night," he replied, and, turning the key in the lock, he strode at once from the room and down the hall to the door at the front, which he opened for himself.

Mrs. Meshe, with one lingering impulse to call him back and try her arts anew, saw him go too swiftly for any such action. Then, in her rage, she moved across the deserted room, snatched a cold, green statuette from a stand, and hurled it down upon the floor, where it crashed in a thousand pieces.

XXXI

THERE were beads of perspiration on Hakon's forehead when at length he found himself out upon the street. The cool night air dried the moisture, but reaction must have made him weak had not anger sustained the intensity of his feelings.

In addition to his wrath, he felt an apprehension not to be avoided. He had bested this woman, left behind him in the darkened house, but he knew that such a victory is not infrequently more to be dreaded than defeat. He had scorned her, and left her enraged. She knew that Ruth existed—thanks to his blind folly with the locket—and she would work him any harm that lay in her power.

What she could do to thwart his political ambitions was quite beyond calculation. He conceded everything in this direction. She could doubtless undermine it all — Graystone's plans and wishes along with the rest. And there could be but little question that she would, since a treachery to Graystone had already been planned in her mind.

Hakon had grown accustomed to reflect on desperate outcomes. Threatened crisis had recently been his companion. He no longer developed symptoms of mental panic at any such menace. In some ways, at least, it would be a relief to know that all his presidential hopes were rendered impossible. But when to all this was added the thought

of the harm this now enraged woman could do to his name—the name that Ruth held in high esteem—he felt like invoking the curse of Heaven on Graystone and all his shameless company.

Disgust at himself, as well as at all this business, returned to Hakon as if before he had merely tasted its flavor. He was nauseated, morally and mentally. Without attempting to excuse his own weaknesses, or to palliate the fact that he had brought it nearly all upon himself, he nevertheless revolted at the thought of continuing the game any further. He felt he could not endure to humiliate his decency another whole day, casting himself, body and soul, prone at the feet of such a clique as Graystone and Bertha Meshe represented. At least he could dash it all in their faces; and while his own hands would not be clean, he could wear them bare of the grime, if he toiled in honor sufficiently long.

Yes, he would simply end the matter, once for all. It was not to be borne. He wondered why it was that he had compromised so many times before—why he had not wrenched himself free, scorning a bargain that shamed his every instinct of American manhood. Then, as always before, he thought of Ruth and her wishes, ambitions, her almost inordinate desire to push him forward towards this presidential goal.

He had been walking down the street—Central Park West—that borders the splendid stretch of trees, rocks, and grass that make the city's breathing-place. He was almost come to the end of the park. He crossed the street and stood leaning against the low stone wall that separates the sidewalk from the shrubbery. He wanted to think here, where the trees offered a sense of brotherhood to his mind.

For a moment he lost himself in a mental tribute to the beauty of the night, exemplified almost as it might have been in the country, where nature alone would reign. He was waiting for a second before he took up his subject, with Ruth as its newest corollary —Ruth and her attitude of mind.

A car that went noisily up the street, just behind him, destroyed the illusion of nature, despite the loveliness of trees in their vernal green. The Graystone game returned to his meditations with all its sordid features. What should he do, now that memories of Ruth's established attitude of mind had entered the problem?"

"She is my wife," he said to himself three times over. Then he knew what the whole situation demanded. Ruth was his partner for life — perhaps. They were married—yet only in the purview of the law — not as yet in the sight of God. The least that he, as a man, could do was to go to her, confess all his bargaining, all his errors, his deceits—and ask her counsel. She had a right to be consulted, a right to protect the name of Hakon from shame.

He tried to fancy what her answer would be—how the light would change in her eyes—how her scorn would be expressed. She could not fail to be shocked, disappointed, chagrined. She might even wish to be freed herself. Yes—even that!

He thought of it bitterly, but still as the fate he had somewhat courted and deserved. He had been but a craven to marry Ruth in secret and hide the truth so long. He admitted that the time to have told her all of this would have been in that hour in which he asked her to become his wife by secret ceremony. He had married her first—to repent and tell her later, when it was all too late.

No! he told himself. It was not too late. She could still snatch back her freedom did she wish. He would tell her so. He would give her the chance at once, before any further complications arose to bring humiliation to her door. He could give her a chance to escape the mire in which he felt himself to be floundering.

In the fever of his new resolve he drew out his watch. A mad idea of hastening at once to her home and telling it all to-night possessed him momentarily. But the hour was far too late. He was walking now across the front of the park, in Fifty-ninth Street. Replacing the watch in his pocket, he felt the tiny locket dangle against his hand. He clasped it in his fingers hungrily, as if already he felt it slipping from his keeping. She would wish it returned; of this he felt convinced. And there was nothing else he could do, in decency, but to tell her of all he had done. To wait and permit her to hear it from some one else would be the act of a coward. If he must be shamed in her sight, he preferred to bring about his own abasement.

He walked all the way to the private hotel where he made a home that lacked every element of home existence. He entered his room without accosting any one in the halls. There was no one he knew in the place; there were few that he knew in all the town. He had been a lonely man in New York City, and to-night it came to his mind with particular force.

The last thought he had, before he fell into troubled sleep, was of his isolation. Should Ruth, whose ways had opened such a vista of social friendships, should she desire back her pledge of wifehood, he would have but one good friend remaining — Breeme.

Nevertheless, to-morrow afternoon, at the latest, Ruth should know.

The following morning he sent a messenger to Ruth with a note in partial explanation of his enforced absence of the evening before and asking the privilege of calling later in the day.

At eleven o'clock he was called up on the 'phone by Graystone, who spoke with more than his customary sharpness of tone.

"Come in and see me at one," he said. "Sharp at one. And don't come down here, or leave here, either, in anything but a closed carriage."

Hakon rose, and walking to the window, after answering that he would endeavor to call in promptly on the hour, stood looking out on the roof-tops and the jets of white steam, floating away against the blue of the clear June sky, revealed to his view. A workman on top of a building below was preparing a rope, a halyard line, which he meant to replace on a flag-pole bereft of its lines in some storm of the season of winds now passed for a year.

To watch the fellow afforded Hakon some respite from his thoughts. This summons from Graystone, coming so promptly on the interview with Mrs. Meshe, foreboded anything but pleasure. In despair of conjecturing what it might portend, Hakon shut his mind to mental speculation and focussed doggedly on that workman below.

The laborer took up his slender rope, and without the slightest hesitation climbed the pole. The slender reed of pine swayed to and fro with every movement made by the climber. It seemed threatening to break at any second. Perilous as the calling appeared to Hakon, standing in security at his office window, yet something that was almost envy

struck into his breast. The fellow below had only physical hurt to fear—and that he evidently scorned, or had forgotten.

The task of reeving in the line was almost concluded when Walter Breeme gave a knock on Hakon's door and entered the room.

"Hello, old man," he said. "Say, I had to hunt you up, when I found you'd moved. I won't tell where you are. I had to see you, though, because I'm in love. I thought I'd drop in and break it to you gently, and then perhaps I'd feel better. It's awful. My appetite is destroyed, my sleep is on vacation, my nerve is as white and limber as a string, and my mind is a howling desolation—with one little, brown-haired oasis in it and me prowling around the suburbs of the same, afraid to approach, and worse afraid some other chap will butt in if I don't. Do you think a mustard-plaster would be any good to cold feet? Say, it's ice-cream with red-hot coals on top! What do you advise? Now, don't say boldness, on your life! I never was bold, and if I ever had been I wouldn't dare to look a rough rider in the face this morning. Can't you advise me to wait and see which way that brown hair is blowing—say this evening?"

Hakon was amused sufficiently to forget his own reflections. Breeme looked far more desperate than his words might imply—desperately healthy, cheerful, and fat.

"Do I know who she is?" inquired Hakon, who thought of nothing else to say. "Is she any one I've met?"

"Well—yes," answered Breeme, with some hesitation. "It's that beautiful Miss Weeve that you've met at the Hobarts'. Her hair is a little light to be

called brown, but I like brown, so that is what I call it. Now, how many weapons, designed for a poor fellow's slaughter, do you suppose she may have been whetting during the last two weeks?"

"Paint-brushes and crayons?" inquired Hakon.

"No. Maxims and six-pounders," answered Breeme, with a grin. "I want to know in which part of the neck a man usually gets it, and what he does with his own remains afterwards. You see, old man, I've been running a bluff as big as if I held a royal flush, and when it comes to the showdown I'll look like the battered deuce in a five-cent deck, in a railroad game, so I had to let somebody know."

"Well," mused Hakon, "what do you want me to say?"

"I don't know," Breeme confessed. "I don't want you to give me hope that might prove false, nor counsel that might result in trouble; but anything else you've got on hand, like first aid to the injured, would be very welcome. We both know that friendly advice was invented to kill poor friendship. Just reflect on all the symptoms and encourage me, like the doctors do, with something that you know won't cure me and that will keep me coming for more. I'm like lots of fashionably sick folks; I don't want to be cured and I do want the doctor to tell me I've got what I tell him I've got."

"Oh, I can see you're in love, head over heels," said Hakon, taking his cue.

"Say, do I really show the wear and tear?" inquired Breeme, hopefully. "Love, you know, is like a dog that rips up the whole house, but you wouldn't lose him for a mint. Do I look kind of ripped up and dishevelled?" He pawed his hair

into wild disorder and smiled as he waited Hakon's decision.

"You look pathetic," was the answer. "I wish there was something more I could do."

"Thanks, old man," said Breeme. "By-the-way, I see the reporters got you at last. Roberts is out of town or he'd feel rather sore. I'm glad your fight is going so well. In the mean time, if you think of anything new about this trouble I've got—this attack of love-in-gitis—let me know. Be as good as I am—and dodge the rewards. Good-bye."

And Hakon was sorry to see him go.

XXXII

AT one o'clock Hakon entered Graystone's room, expecting to find Mrs. Meshe once more beside the seat of power and trouble in the atmosphere. Instead he beheld Mr. Senn, who sat regarding Graystone quietly, while the latter worked at his papers. Mrs. Meshe was still in town, however, and was watching Hakon's movements sharply.

Both Graystone and Senn ignored Hakon's entrance for a moment, and merely nodded when he addressed them with the customary salutation. Graystone growled, "Sit down," and catching up a pencil made a note on the margin of a document.

Hakon drew a chair away from the wall and sat down. He had nothing in particular to say, and for nearly five minutes no one broke the silence.

"Mr. Senn has just returned from a quick round of the circuit," said Graystone, abruptly, at last. "He reports the papers quieting down again a little on the Hakon rumors, and some of the scare clearing out of our way. More delegates are beginning to see the virtue of saving the country from Brevoort and are getting ready to knife him to a finish at the very last minute. I thought you'd like to know that nothing short of hell and high water can head us off from landing the nomination on the first ballot. That's all. May need you soon, any minute now, to give us a few little pointers to add to the speech

they'll spring when we put you in nomination. Got anything to say?"

"I—don't believe I have," answered Hakon, in whose veins the old excitement had suddenly risen, despite all conflicting emotions. "Thank you, however, for letting me know."

"You know the way out," said Graystone. "'Bye."

And Hakon departed without having heard Mr. Senn speak a word, and with Graystone's growled-out news trailing nebulous thoughts as bright as star-dust through his mind. Outside in the street his carriage was followed by a closed cab in which Bertha Meshe was an occupant.

A worry, heretofore half formed in his mind, as he had marked, day by day, the confident note of some of the papers that saw no chance of anything save Brevoort as Republican nominee, vanished into vapor, even as he made his way from the building to his waiting carriage. Then, when the thought of the brief time remaining before the convention would meet in Chicago and do its work, all his former elation climbed in his veins, even as his heart-beat strengthened and increased in speed.

He had walked into Graystone's presence ready to meet an onslaught of accusation; he was coming away with a wilder, more inconsequent exultation in his breast than he had known since first the game with Graystone had commenced. Some way, heretofore, he had only half believed that these silent powers could perform their promised deeds of might; that the sovereign will of the people could be confiscated bodily; that a stream of gold could hurl him as the magnates' choice pell-mell athwart all obstacles and into the very White House itself.

This afternoon a peculiar, deep-seated confidence that all would develop as they wished was implanted in his mind. He could see himself president—see the picture plainly—feel the very focus of eighty million pairs of eyes upon him. Had prophecy itself laid bare the leaves of her book whereon were traced the things that were yet to be, he could not have felt a greater conviction that the prize so long coveted was soon to be placed in his grasp. He was awed as well as excited, for beneath it all played the consciousness that he meant to overthrow all Graystone's hopes and dictates when once securely elected, and become the servant of the people—a voice for the voiceless, a power for the powerless.

He hung his hand on his watch-chain, and presently his fingers conveyed to his mind the fact that they were clasped upon that small golden locket. The pang-like twinge that shot through his heart almost staggered him as he rode again up the street. He had dreamed like a fool. He had lost all reckoning of facts, and in particular of the fact that he had promised himself he would go to Ruth, tell her all, and perhaps abandon the enterprise that made him now the prey of shame.

The struggle that waged in his being was brief. He had yielded to many temptations where only his individual rights or wrongs had been involved; he had fallen a victim, justifying all that he did as he entered further and further into questionable paths; now, however, love had become an element—love and Ruth.

He could bear the thought of standing low in the estimation of Graystone, when the hour should come; he could readily ignore the opinions of Bertha Meshe; but he could not bear to think of further demeaning

himself in the sight of Ruth. What he had to confess at present was the total he thought he could endure. Even so much as this might prove disastrous to the last degree, but at least he must give Ruth a chance to clear away from the wreckage, which she might think he had created of all that his manhood had once represented.

He had been forgetting Mrs. Meshe and the look he had seen on her face when leaving her the previous evening. It was obvious she had not as yet done anything that Graystone might have learned. What she might accomplish in the next few days must remain to be seen. But come what might, he would make his confession to Ruth and abide by the sentence that she must, in her womanhood, pronounce.

He gave a new direction to his driver when the carriage halted, and was driven onward to the Hobart residence. Mrs. Meshe followed closely behind, and beholding him enter the house, ascertained the number and was driven away.

Five minutes later Ruth was confronting Hakon, her brow drawn down in a frown that she could not make appear like a genuine sign of displeasure while the bright lights so danced in her eyes and the sweet smile played about the corners of her mouth.

"Deceitful lord and master," she said, "how dared you excite my hopes last evening, and then 'let the old cat die' so gradually? I kept on hoping till fully ten o'clock; and I was going to say lots of nice things about last Saturday, and now I won't. Just think how long ago it was that you left me there in that funny little house with Mrs. Boggs! Now, what have you got to say?"

"I've come," he said, "to have a long and serious talk. I have something disagreeable to tell you."

A serious look came at once into Ruth's brown eyes. That he was worried she could see as he turned his face towards the light.

"Something disagreeable?" she said. "Is it very disagreeable? Please sit down. Perhaps I can help. Is it something about the political fight?"

"It was all—nearly all—concerned with politics," he said. "It goes further now."

"If you have lost all chance—" she started.

"It isn't that," he interrupted, stung by the very fact that the game was all working successfully. "I have just learned that everything is going well—that almost nothing can prevent the nomination—my nomination, but—"

"Oh, I'm glad—glad!" cried Ruth, in girlish excitement. "I felt it! I shall be so proud!—I'm glad for—"

"But you cannot be proud," he broke in, bluntly. "You cannot be proud of what I have done. I have come to tell you the part of it all that cannot make you glad."

She saw that his face was white, that his mouth was set and hard. Her own rejoicing had embittered his thoughts and rendered more difficult the task he had come to perform, where she had hoped to give him happiness only by telling her delight.

She became a trifle pale herself. His attitude was new to her ken; she had never seen him before in mental despair.

"A part of it that cannot make me glad?" she repeated. "But anything that you have achieved, after wanting it so much, could only make me glad. Tell me. Of course it isn't anything to be ashamed of?"

He smiled, and she felt her heart slightly sinking.

"It's a long story," he answered. "I ought to have told you before. I don't know why I didn't. But—it isn't too late even now, I hope. I want you to listen to it all. And whatever you do at the end I shall accept it without a word of complaint."

"Oh, perhaps you'd better not tell me," she said, in sudden apprehension. "I—I mean, I'm ready to hear it. But please, dear, remember—that I love you very much indeed."

She had meant to help or to warn him—she scarcely knew which in her new, uncertain fear. When he turned away his face and began to talk, she knew she had made his task a little harder.

He began his story with the chapters enacted more than five long years before. Of his rise to political heights he gave her a brief synopsis only; of the satisfying joy which success had vouchsafed him he spoke with increasing fervor. Quickly, but vividly, he outlined the plans he had hoped to execute, the work he had hoped to perform. His face was revealing anew the old-time fanatical zeal he had felt in striving for the betterment of his kind and his country. Then a pallor transformed his exaltation as he once more reviewed the defeat which had followed his short career of public usefulness and the bitterness in which at last he had been obliged to recognize the utter futility of struggling, almost single-handed, against the giant force which had crushed him at the end, and likewise crushed out the pride he had always taken in his father's career of honesty.

"I was first cut down by former friends," he said, in tragic memory of the all it had meant at the time. "My enemies added an almost vital hurt. I had to go on living with wounds in my body such as gave

Cæsar a rest eternal and immortal. And there was nothing—nothing to put upon the wounds, and no way to hide them but to leave my native land."

Ruth made no interruption. She merely placed her hand for a second on his, as if she yet would assuage those old-time injuries.

He told her how he had struggled even then to win back a little of the all he had lost; how barren and disheartening he had found the effort. Then he had gone abroad for a year and a half, returning at last as a mother must return to a child that she loves, with a sore in his heart, as well as with love, and neither reduced, but rather increased, by the self-inflicted exile from his country.

"I couldn't blot out my wish to help the political Atlas carry the burdens of the careless, lovable, American people," he said. "I couldn't help being a serious man! I loved nothing but politics—government—self-government of a great democracy. Every blackened page of European history, every foot of blood-soaked ground in those ancient countries, cried out to me of the wrongs of man to man. I got no rest in those countries where countless generations had fought with their naked fists for liberty. The smell of tyrannies centuries old still lingers in the unsweetened corners of those European empires. I came back only to realize that ever since my last defeat, the powers that daily throttle yet another feeble hope for national integrity had gained new strongholds with every passing month. And I looked so long on their colossal strength that—my eyes were blinded and my brain was touched. I admired power. I hungered to be something—anything. Ambition itself may become a tyrant—and to mine I submitted at last."

He told of the first insinuating overture on the part of the forces which he had so antagonized before. He revealed the mad, unhealthy growth of his own ambition, even while telling of the pressure the powers had put upon him. He spared himself nothing in relating the manner of his coming to the camp of the one-time enemy, ready at last to enlist in their ranks if the price he demanded could be paid.

In a hurried résumé of all the preliminary steps, he gave Ruth a very clear idea of everything that had gone before that final night when at last he sat with Graystone after dinner, and heard the brain-piece of the giant organization accede to his wish to make him president.

At the end of this portion of his story he halted for a moment. Ruth had borne it well enough up to this. But the part that affected herself was yet to come. She was fascinated, not only by the revelations he was making, but also by his personality and the very mental anguish he was suffering as he laid bare all his secret self.

She now beheld the perspiration come in tiny glinting specks upon his forehead.

"That night," he resumed, "Graystone named the conditions—the particular price he expected me to pay for his support." He hesitated momentarily, then he added, slowly: "He wished me to marry his daughter."

For a moment Ruth failed to comprehend the entire significance of this admission. Then a strange look came on her face.

"And you did?" she said.

He appeared not to hear. Inexorable as fate itself, he went on, depicting page after page of the story, sans mercy to himself, sans mercy to Ruth. He

told of the meeting at Graystone's office—the meeting with his "forces"—and of all they had required. He did not dwell on the subject of Mrs. Meshe; he made his point only on his own particular weakness in the hour when all was promised to his hand. He told of his tacit engagement to Clara, the heartless transaction, losing nothing of its sordidness for the accent that rose in his voice. He told of his meeting with Breeme, and the consequent meeting with herself—the Ruth now sitting before him.

He talked less rapidly when he came to this portion of his narrative. He felt his way, as one who soliloquizes in a dream, to express the subtle happiness that had pierced its way into his lonely life at that time. He was not attempting anything that would palliate his own offence; he was merely stating all the truth nakedly.

Ruth remained motionless and silent. Her eyes were fixed on his face intently. She had lost her splendid color. She was nearly as pale as Hakon himself.

He related incident after incident of all that had happened since. She could feel, as he had felt, the growing resentment which had come upon him. At the galling chapter in which he related the low and shameless method by which Graystone had debased him on the night when the bribery of a judge was effected, Ruth emitted a sharp, hoarse sound that seemed to him to voice his very soul's indignation and loathing.

Nevertheless, he went on without a pause. He was flaying himself, and the blows were raining rapidly. In a hot, swift utterance he related the sequel she herself had furnished to the business respecting his father's letter. She cried out at the Graystone in-

famies. Hakon gave himself no credit; he made no attempt to argue mitigating circumstances in the case for his own shortcomings.

"I suddenly became irresponsible—mad," he said, with a smile that made Ruth suffer. "I asked you to marry me in secret because I loved you almost insanely. Perhaps I wanted to save a little something from the sacrifice—and that was my selfish way of doing it. I have since been subjected to insult, shame, deceit. I have borne it as long as I can. I have grovelled; I am grovelling still, every minute. But at least I can give you a chance before it is all too late. I can give up—"

"Wait!" said Ruth, on whom the latter end of his story had produced results so fast that she could not give them half consideration. "Wait—just a minute," and she covered her eyes with her hand, the better to think. "You promised to marry — this man's daughter. Are you supposed to be engaged to her still?"

"I am," he confessed. "In my madness I took no time to think. It is utterly, absolutely despicable —what I have done."

"Yes," she said, slowly, "it is despicable."

He looked for a second on her face. Her gaze was averted. He could tell no more. The story of what had occurred on the previous evening, at Mrs. Meshe's house, could not be laid at his door; it cast no light on his conduct towards Ruth, or even Clara—and the light already thrown on all the miserable business was sufficiently glaring as it was.

"I don't care about Graystone! I don't care about his daughter—very much!" he declared. "She—but I won't drag her in. It is what I have done to you — and to myself — to decency! . . . Well, I've

told it all. It's all shameless. I don't excuse it. But I can't go on. A man bereft of his own self-respect is alone indeed. I knew how you'd feel. I wouldn't wish to have you feel any other way. And thank God you can have your wifehood back!"

She looked at him quickly. The color rushed to her face; then as swiftly sank.

"I can have it—back?" she said. "But you don't *know* the wrong you've done! You haven't the faintest idea!"

It was his turn now to be bewildered.

"I thought I did," he said. "I know what I've done so well that—"

"You don't!" she interrupted. "You've made me love you—that's the wrong! You've made me love you, in spite of it all! And this other woman: I suppose you have kissed her? You have, of course?"

"Yes," he said, unwilling to demean Clara further by stating that she it was who had done the affectionate advancing, "I have kissed her."

"Since I became—your wife?"

"Since you became my lawful wife," he admitted, frankly. "I came here to-day to say—that you can tear up your certificate if you wish. After what I've done, I can offer no more than that—nor any less."

"But I don't wish to tear it up!" she answered, vehemently. "You know I can't tear it up! You know I've got to go on loving you, whether I wish to or not! You know that after Saturday— Oh, I might be able to forget but for that! I might have believed you as utterly base as you try to prove yourself here this afternoon. Don't tell me again I am free!"

"What shall I tell you next?" he said, with another

of those faint, hopeless smiles that cut her to the heart.

"Tell me that you did all this for love!" she replied. "Tell me you haven't deceived me, too! Tell me that you love me still—or I shall hate you so terribly I shall wish to die!"

She was almost weeping, but she fought it off. Her eyes demanded love unflinchingly.

"If I didn't love you—" he started, but she broke in upon his declaration.

"I know you do!" she cried, in her intensity of feeling. "If you hadn't — that Saturday night — But you have hurt me. You have shattered an idol —my idol! You have dragged yourself down! You have trailed the high ideals I had in defilement. You have struck yourself — and hurt me — here!" and she beat herself upon the heart, and felt her wedding-ring impinge upon her bosom.

"And may I not hurt you more by owning that my love has made me weak?" he inquired, in a calm she could hardly bear to see him inflict upon himself. "If you will not let me give you up—how else can I be punished?"

The poignancy of this went straight to her innermost being.

"Oh, I don't want you punished any further," she said. "You have taken all the punishment, after all. Your face — your poor dear face shows it! Why should I wish to see you punished any more?"

He could scarcely speak. His emotion swayed him tremendously. Nevertheless, he avoided the new, sweet look of compassion abruptly come to her eyes, and forced himself doggedly on.

"But I've come to find out what you think," he

persisted. "I've told you all this because I can no longer guide myself. I've come here ready to give an eye for an eye. In your particular direction I am wholly disarmed. What about this political fight? Is there anything to do but to give it up—cast it back in their teeth and tell them to keep all their smutted honors?"

"Give it up?" she echoed. "Leave your name and all behind in their hands—leave them everything—after all that you have brought yourself to do?—and all they did to ruin your faith in your father? What could you bring back from the conflict? What could you gain for yourself or your country? Give up? What have you got but your father's real letter to fling in their teeth? No! No! Never! They would have nearly everything that you have been able to give, and you would have nothing. You cannot give it up! You've got to go on now, and let them make you president! You've got to work it out—get it—take it from their hands, and then be what you said a little while ago—the father of decency, who will do almost anything in the world to interpret the people's honest scheme of government!"

He was thrilled by the outburst of her eloquence; yet humiliation continued to embitter the draught she bade him to quaff. He could make no more compromises with sophistry.

"You know, of course, that to go on with the game, resolved as I am to be the people's president or none, will be a continuation of my treachery?" he said. "You see that as plainly as I?"

"And if a treachery can only be met by a treachery, and the one that these creatures are planning is so gigantic, can you do any less?" she asked. Then

she added a question which more than once he had put to himself. "Don't you suppose the nation would applaud you if ever they found out all you had done?"

"I don't want the nation's applause as I wanted it once," he confessed, with a slight tinge of melancholy in his utterance. "I could be so content, after all of this, if only I could so restore myself that you—just you—would applaud me."

She stifled an impulse to take the one short step necessary and throw her arms about his neck; she choked back the impulse to cry. He had destroyed some high ideals; she could not permit him a pardon on the spur of the moment, in answer to a whim of emotion.

"You will do it all. yet," she answered. "You will make me very proud to be your wife. I shall watch to see you win back—everything."

"Thank you, Ruth," he murmured. "I only wish I had told you all that was going on before we went on that ride."

"Don't wish that—dearest," she said, in her honesty. "I don't believe I'd have—gone—to the magistrate's. And then— Oh, let's not waste our time wishing backward! My wishes all beckon us ahead. . . . Besides, we've had some happy moments —and nothing can take them away."

Hakon resisted the amelioration she offered him with stubborn persistency. He had suffered too deeply in the last hour to accept many smiles from fickle joy.

"There is one thing you must not forget," he said, "and that is, that going on with the game means going on with it all—including Clara Graystone."

"Oh," said Ruth, the softness dying out of her

glance. "I think I had forgotten that. . . . I suppose you may have to kiss her again, quite often, perhaps, and for several months."

"When the nomination comes—if they land it," said Hakon, "I shall make some sort of excuse to leave New York City till after election."

"In order to leave this Clara?"

"To leave—all the dangers," he answered.

"And leave me, too?"

"What can I do?" he inquired.

Ruth was silent for a moment. She had never been more hungry to lean against his arm in her life. She felt she had suffered for him and with him, this long afternoon; she felt more thoroughly that she was his than ever before. But she was strong.

"Yes," she replied, assenting to the plan slowly, "I suppose I will have to pay my little part of the price, along with yours. . . . I'm glad you will not have to see her very often before the convention, anyway. If you remain away, may she not possibly kiss that Mr. Kelpie, and be just about as happy?"

Hakon said: "I wish she might—and be better satisfied. I hate it all!"

"I hope you'll stay away from there all you can," added Ruth. "It's too bad I can't help—but I'm not going to let you come to see me so frequently, either."

He thought it her sentence of punishment, which he knew he deserved. As a matter of fact, it was only her means of self-protection. She dared not become much fonder than she was—not in the light of the things that might be happening. His banishment meant quite as much punishment to herself as it did to him.

"I expected something of the sort," he confessed,

smiling once more in that wistful way. "I'll only come when you want me."

"No, you can't come as often as I want you," she answered, softly, revealing a phase of the sentence that he had not surmised to exist. "It isn't a matter of our wants. It's just good sense. And you'd better take that locket off your chain."

He removed it at once and held it towards her. "Shall I give it back?" he said.

"Oh, John!" she said. "Oh, dearest! Don't do that, please. Put it in your pocket—and then do say good-bye and go."

He had done her bidding and was gone, almost at once.

Then she ran to the window, and, watching him depart, called on his name with every term of endearment and cried to her heart's content.

XXXIII

MRS. MESHE made a somewhat belated trip to Washington and returned the following afternoon, which was Thursday. The work allotted to her care had been done with a thoroughness almost exceptional.

Two reasons, like actuating springs, lay behind the woman's determination to bring perfection to all she was doing to promote Hakon's presidential boom. In the first place, she was well aware that, through his system of checking and counter-checking, Amos Graystone was watching her every move. He left nothing to chance, nothing to whim. She was far too clever to attempt Hakon's destruction so crudely as to bring on a possible injury to herself. In the second place, the half-formed scheme she had in mind for Hakon's punishment was beset by complexities. She told herself, subconsciously, that she might yet withdraw her threatened mine, for she found it very difficult indeed to believe that she might not win him, after all. In addition to this, she wished to make his punishment absolutely overwhelming, should she finally decide, at the final moment, to compass his ruin. All of this made it quite essential that she pursue the labor of building up his political strength with even renewed activity. Therefore it had been that she had toiled with fanatical zeal and with astounding results.

Throughout her entire pilgrimage she had dwelt in her thoughts on that last humiliating interview with the man who had scorned her and left her defeated. Her wrath had been percolating through her entire being ever since. It was now no longer on the surface; it saturated her very essence. Whether Hakon should capitulate or not, the time would come when her fury would have its way—with his name, his ambition, or his dearest wish. She inclined, moreover, to the belief that he would never relinquish so much as an inch of the ground he had gained, and therefore every hour found her mind over-busy examining plans for his downfall.

Her own defeat had been the more exasperating, bitter, intolerable, for the fact that she had realized that some other woman provided the element that made John Hakon invulnerable. Like many another creature of her sex, similarly gifted and similarly deficient, she entertained a notion that to confront this other woman—this Ruth—and poison her mind against the man she might possibly love, would be to bring Hakon back to herself, humbled and eager for proffered friendship. That the house to which she had followed the man was the one where Ruth was living she was quite convinced.

Inasmuch as there was nothing she could do today, she proceeded at once to the Broadway headquarters—the main ganglion of the "nervous system" of finance and politics over which Graystone presided.

She entered the sanctum briskly and met with a slight surprise. Hakon was there.

He arose from his seat as she entered, and nodded to her calmly, even politely.

Instantly equal to the exigencies of the case, as

well as to Hakon's equipoise and self-command, she greeted him precisely as she had on former occasions, a tinge of indifference in her manner, together with an entire absence of feeling.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," she said, swinging about a chair for herself before Hakon could offer his gallantries. "It will be a saving of breath to tell you both together that everything looks particularly well."

"H'm!" said Graystone, who had greeted his feminine factotum with a curt "Hullo"; and he laid aside his papers for a moment. "Yes," he added, "some things are going well enough. They ought to be. It's taking money enough to float Great Britain's navy. The hour has come when we've got to do some fine Italian thinking. The papers are excited again, and another reporter has found Hakon's new office, and they want to send their biggest man around to get an interview."

"To-day?" said Mrs. Meshe. "They found the new office to-day?"

"This morning," answered Hakon. "I am supposed to meet their man at five—if possible."

"Well, isn't it possible?" inquired the woman, who hoped to see him paraded in type from one end of the country to the other, in order that her own hold upon the situation might be strengthened. "It's got to come pretty soon, I should think."

"You are thinking with hair-pins instead of brains," said Graystone, aggressively. "What can he say that will do any good, and what couldn't he say that would raise a little hell? It ain't the chicken that crows that lays the eggs. If a man don't talk, who's going to know whether he knows anything or not?

It takes a wizard to reel off an interview and say nothing. Hakon, what do you think yourself?"

Hakon answered: "I don't believe I'm a wizard."

"Neither do I," consented Graystone. "You talked enough as senator. Let them dig up your record. Sounds fine, and it's old and ripe. This ain't a newspaper game. You can 'phone that you regret. You're obliged to leave the city at—what time is it now?" he glanced at his watch. "You've got to catch a train at four. It's now three-forty-five. Here, you can use this 'phone and have it done."

Hakon took the instrument that stood on the desk, and calling up the office of the newspaper in question, expressed his "regrets" precisely on the lines his chief had suggested.

Meantime, Graystone had returned to his work. Mrs. Meshe waited in silence.

"I don't want either the country or the uninitiated Brevoort asses at the convention to have time to wake up and sneeze before it's all over," Graystone remarked. "There is a big bunch of popular feeling for Brevoort that we're up against. Does Senator What-you-callum know that we've got to nail the nomination on the very first ballot?"

"Everybody knows it, from all I can learn," replied Mrs. Meshe. "What is the latest news from Senn?"

"All right," answered Graystone. "I wish I had a man like Sixteen Bryan to put John in nomination," he mused, almost moodily. "His tongue is a Fourth-of-July procession and fireworks in the evening." He turned upon Mrs. Meshe. "How's the money holding out?" he demanded.

"I haven't collected all reports," she answered.

"Perhaps Mr. Hakon would rather not listen to all the tiresome details."

"No," said Graystone. "John, that's all. Glad you 'phoned me about that interview. Don't see anybody. Hide. Get away from town. Don't talk. Thought of anything new to incorporate in the nominating speech—anything cheap and gaudy, to electrify a fool convention?"

"No," answered Hakon. "I have never been a hero—not even on paper."

"Well—the next best thing to blowing your own trumpet is to shut up and look profound," said Graystone, in his mirthless way. "Now I'll talk with Mrs. Meshe."

Hakon left the room and the building, and, taking a carriage at the door, was driven out towards the tomb of Grant, where he sat on a bench, in the sunlight, alone, looking at the river that flowed so placidly by in its channel. He had no heart to take out his car; he could not go to visit Ruth; he preferred to avoid the cheerful Breeme; and his offices the buzzing reporters had made untenable.

He sat there motionless, dulling his thoughts as best he might, till the sun at length went down in a crimson pageantry of clouds. The river took on the softened tints of madder and lake that blended with the purples of the Jersey shore. The ugly features of that farther side, comprising factories and chimneys, lost their harshness. Floating its banner of pure white steam, a tug-boat passed down the tideway. Then in beauty and gracefulness a river steamer glided by, heading up-stream for Albany. A puffing locomotive, slowly but sturdily dragging a freight-train of nearly forty cars, went rumbling along, below, on the rails that parallel the very edge

of the river, scarcely ten feet up from the highest flow. Hakon counted the cars as he had when a boy. Then he left his seat and slowly wandered down the pathway towards the town.

It was merely the necessity of eating that made him think of searching out a restaurant. His mind, on the topic of the evening meal, fled back to his boyhood — to home. He wondered if in all New York there was such a home as that. He wondered if ever again he would know of another so inviting. Then he thanked God that at least his thoughts were peopled, and with faces he could visit thus to-night.

XXXIV

WHEN Friday afternoon arrived, and Alice Hobart invited Ruth to a drive in the park with herself and her mother, the hour had come when the half-worried, wholly miserable girl could bear but little more of her self-enforced isolation from Hakon. She refused the offered excursion in the park. She preferred, she said, to remain at home.

Nevertheless, when the house was empty of all save the servants and herself, she was swiftly giving way to the dictates of her nature, which prompted the thought of writing to Hakon to come there at once. With a messenger-boy to take a note, he might easily arrive in less than an hour.

The thought excited her thoroughly. She had been too severe. This she had told herself a hundred times in the past twenty-four hours. He had looked so drawn and pale when he went; he was so fearfully alone in all this city. He was facing so much and enduring so much.

In a sweet, mad spirit of sophistry, that almost made her think she was sending for him only to cheer him, to give him encouragement, she sat down to scribble off a note as fast as her fingers could travel. It was nearly finished when a ring at the bell, coming distinctly to her sharpened ears, made her heart abruptly leap with joy. It was he! She almost knew it was Hakon. She had hoped he might come,

despite his declaration that he should not do so till she wished it.

With her hand pressed hard upon her breast, and her breath coming shortly and quickly, she waited at the door of the library for the servant to come. While the maid was still ten feet from the door Ruth threw it open. Her cheeks were flaming with color. Her eyes were luminous.

"Well?" she said, impatiently. "Any one to see me?"

"Yes, miss, it's a—" started the maid, but Ruth had no time to stop and listen. She ran down the hall as lightly as a swallow.

When she came to the drawing-room door, however, she halted, pressed her hand to her heart once more, as if to gain control of its beating, and entered the apartment quietly, with simulated calm.

To her utter astonishment, a woman—a stranger—arose from a chair and faced her coldly. It was Mrs. Meshe.

Ruth looked at her in bewilderment for a moment, unable to understand why this woman, this handsome, bold-looking person, should be here.

"Why—did you call— Did you wish to see Mrs. Hobart?" she said. "She's away for the afternoon."

"No. I came to see Miss Sherwood," said the visitor, smilingly, and softening her voice to a very pleasant cadence. "Miss Ruth Sherwood. Are you she?" She had recognized Ruth at once from the photograph seen in Hakon's locket.

"Yes," said Ruth. "But I— Won't you please be seated? Do I know who it is?"

Mrs. Meshe had taken an appraisement of Ruth's beauty almost at a glance. She kept her eyes upon

her, however, in a manner far from being offensive, even as she mentally acknowledged to herself the freshness and innocence of Miss Sherwood's charm and deportment.

"You have never met me before," she confessed, with her own most delightful manner uppermost. "My name is Mrs. Meshe. I think we both know some mutual friends. That is, I'm sure—I suppose you know Mr. Hakon—Mr. John Hakon?"

"Yes," said Ruth, "I know Mr. Hakon. Did he send you—ask you to come?"

"Oh, if he only had!" answered Mrs. Meshe, abruptly seized with emotion. "If he only had!" She was silent for a moment, during which Ruth was gazing at her with alarm in her eyes. "No, no; he did not ask me to come. But I could do no less. We are fellow-women. I sincerely trust he is hardly more to you than a mere acquaintance, but for fear—" and she broke off her sentence theatrically.

"Yes," said Ruth, after waiting for a moment, expecting her visitor to continue. "You have come to tell me—something about—Mr. Hakon?"

"If only some one else could have come," replied Mrs. Meshe. "Why should I have to warn you? Why should I have to come and reveal him, after all he has been to me?" She arose and walked swiftly to the window, smiting her hands together in an anguished impatience.

Ruth also arose from the chair she had taken. She put her hand to her throat, where words seemed blocked and choking.

"Warn me?" she said at last, somewhat faintly. "Reveal him?"

"Perhaps he isn't anything to you, after all," replied Mrs. Meshe, turning about in a new sort of

eagerness. "Perhaps you've escaped. Tell me—has he made you care—care for him?"

Ruth felt the warm blood creeping to her face. She felt something more, a species of resentment, not to be explained. Who this woman was she could not know, but something there was about her that awoke antagonism.

"Mr. Hakon—never made me—do anything," she answered. "I don't understand what all this means—why you are here—or who you are."

"He hasn't *made* you care, but you do care," answered Mrs. Meshe, swift to detect and read the signs that she knew. "We have all cared—all of us! Clara Graystone cares—and I care—and you care! I don't know why I came. You are nothing to me. But at least you are innocent—you're a woman. You've got a heart to be broken." Her voice conveyed a sob as she uttered the words. Her acting was superb.

Ruth was very pale again. The dark innuendos were shaking her faith, exciting a terror in her bosom. She was both alarmed and excited. Hakon had told her so much—but had he told it all? What more could there be that he might have revealed?

"Please tell me all that you mean," she said, in an apparent calm she forced upon herself. "Please tell me—everything you mean."

"Do you love him?" demanded Mrs. Meshe. "Tell me—do you love him?"

Ruth was crimsoning as quickly as she had paled.

"I don't—" she faltered, in tremulous dread. "I can't— Did you come here to ask me these questions? I don't know why I should— Will you please explain yourself at once?"

"I haven't any right to ask," agreed her visitor,

contritely. "I wouldn't have answered such a question myself. But I know—I see—and my heart is bleeding—for us all. Whatever else he may have done to you, or to me, he had no right—for he has promised to marry Miss Clara Graystone. He can have no right to make love to any other woman!"

Ruth looked at her visitor steadily. She was repeating to herself nearly every word of Mrs. Meshe's speech. She had expected some statement—some news from which Hakon himself had not already drawn the sting. She had feared something terrible, for which she had tried to be prepared.

"Oh!" she said, and a moment later added, somewhat faintly: "Is that all?"

"All?" echoed Mrs. Meshe, dumfounded to find her bombshell exploded so harmlessly. "Is that all? Isn't that enough, with him making declarations of love to you to which you have no right to listen?"

Ruth was slowly becoming angered.

"I haven't said he has made any declarations," she answered.

"You poor, dear child," cried Mrs. Meshe, heartbrokenly. "As if I haven't seen your locket on his chain! It was that—your locket—that made me question his honesty—in all that he said to me! When I found he was engaged to Miss Graystone—was there anything I could do but to come and let you know—particularly when he told me you were nothing, absolutely nothing, to him? You, with your poor, sweet locket!" Her eyes seemed brimming with tears. She turned away her face to hide her emotion.

Ruth had no answer ready for such a revelation. There was something of truth, something of fact in

what this woman was relating. Yet she, Ruth, was Hakon's wife. That thought recurred to her mind a dozen times a second. She wanted to cry out this one great, conquering fact. Her lips almost parted for the purpose, but she knew she must not tell. She knew not what to say or to think; she was clearly aware of one thing only — that she hated, feared, distrusted this strange, boldly beautiful woman. Nevertheless, she wrung her hands, for she was distraught.

"I cannot believe that all you are telling me is true," she said at last, attempting as before to be calm. "You must have been deceived." She said it as if it afforded her a hope that she very much required.

"Deceived?" repeated Mrs. Meshe. "Deceived in my trust? Yes! Cruelly — cruelly deceived! But I was not deceived about you, Miss Sherwood—I wish to Heaven I could have been deceived on that! I only came to warn you—only to warn a fellow-woman! Surely—surely you cannot go on and be the same to this man that you have been before?"

Ruth was regaining a species of calmness.

"Have I said I have been anything to Mr. Hakon?" she inquired. "Or that he has been anything to me?"

"You haven't. You are brave. I see it," declared Mrs. Meshe. "I admire your courage. But, now that you know—surely now—"

"I shall be just the same to Mr. Hakon as I have been—just the same!" Ruth interrupted, in the desperation of a wife who must go on with her bargain. "Nothing will be altered for what you have said."

Her strength was a factor on which Mrs. Meshe had failed to count. The woman was baffled. She

could not comprehend the situation. She flew to another tack. She had come here determined to score a point, and she meant to succeed, whatsoever the cost.

"I know—I know," she said, in accents of bitterness. "You cannot believe me. I refused to believe it all myself at first. It could not be true, I was certain. Perhaps you have been spared a little of the shame that has been my portion at his hands—the shame that I finally comprehend—now that it is all too late. Your turn may not have come as yet—"

"What do you mean?" demanded Ruth, interrupting this horrifying statement. "Tell me what you mean!"

"Don't ask it!" replied Mrs. Meshe, almost fiercely. "Don't make me confess any more of my wretchedness. When a woman makes an error, under promise of marriage— Oh, let me keep a little of it back!"

Ruth was very white. She eyed the woman before her intently. Her own thoughts were in a panic. Yet above them all arose one clear fact—that Hakon had been more than merely generous on that night in the rain. She started to cry. "But I—his wife—I know better!" Again, however, she knew she must be silent.

"It's too much to believe," she said at last, faintly. "It doesn't sound possible."

"No, it doesn't sound possible," agreed Mrs. Meshe, and she laughed as if her happiness were wrecked completely. "I know how it sounds to an innocent woman—who hasn't had her turn."

Ruth was furious at the insult conveyed by such a speech.

"But Mr. Hakon is my"—she checked herself at the short word "husband," great as her exasperation

had become—"my friend!" she cried. "He's an honorable gentleman. What you tell me cannot be true—it isn't true! I don't believe it!"

"I didn't imagine you would, poor dear," replied Mrs. Meshe, compelling herself to remain still humble in appearance, despite the rage that was burning within her. "I wish I could tell you it isn't true—that it's all imagination. But ask him—make him tell you where he spent the evening—last Tuesday—and the Saturday evening before—and still another evening prior to that. Ask him—and see what he will say."

She had overstepped herself for once. Had she been content to name Tuesday evening only, leaving out that reference to Saturday, her charge might still have been sustained. As it was, Ruth knew she was lying—she knew all about where Hakon had spent that Saturday evening, tramping through the rain, to spare herself the slightest embarrassment. But suddenly as she wished to answer, she adroitly planned to make herself wholly certain of her ground.

"Tuesday evening—and the Saturday evening before?" she repeated.

Mrs. Meshe was deceived by the pallor of Ruth's countenance. She failed to interpret its real significance. She thought to clinch her argument.

"Particularly that Saturday evening," she replied. "That is the one evening of my life I have the greatest cause to regret. It was not until Tuesday evening, this week, that I had my first little doubt. It was then that I first saw your locket on his chain."

It was only half a triumph, after all, that Ruth was welcoming. On that Saturday night Hakon was blameless, absolutely. This was her solace in the

stress of the hour. The Tuesday night indictment must, however, of necessity rest upon something genuine, since the locket would have been upon his watch-chain almost for the very first time—and he had broken his promise to visit herself, and without a word of warning or explanation till the following day, and even then it had been a generality. Moreover, he had come to her here, that Wednesday afternoon, to make his confession, after *something* extraordinary had happened the previous night.

It was because Hakon had told her so much, all of it shaming to himself, that she longed to give him an opportunity to clear himself of all of this. She was proud, moreover, and after the answers already made to this woman, could not begin to betray a weakening of manner. If the woman before her could lie about that Saturday night she could lie about it all. After a silence that seemed very protracted she said:

"It's a very grave charge you are making, Mrs. Meshe. You ought to be very certain it is all absolutely true."

Mrs. Meshe was exasperated anew. The girl, in her way, was quite as impossible as Hakon.

"Good Heavens, how you must love the man!" she said. "And you must believe he loves you also—even more than he does Miss Graystone!"

Ruth was aroused herself.

"I feel very sure that any man who cared for me could never care for—for two other women such—for another woman like yourself—for instance," she dared to say. "I don't wish to hurt your feelings, but you have told me some things that I know are false. This interview cannot do any good, I am sure."

Her manner was not to be mistaken. Mrs. Meshe

knew she must have made some blunder. The girl's sudden confidence and defiant attitude could not be otherwise explained. Nevertheless, she had yet another card up her sleeve.

"I haven't told you all the truth," she confessed. "I have purposely concealed a little, and even misstated some of the facts—for what woman on earth wishes to uncover all her shame? You are merciless—pitiless. I cannot comprehend your attitude towards a man so utterly heartless and base. I have not told you that his engagement to Clara Graystone was made to gratify his political hopes. You seemed to know about his engagement; but, let me tell you, that one word of his attentions to you—and all his political chances would be ruined instantly! You could be his ruin—you, with your stubborn, girlish love!"

"If you please—" started Ruth, but her visitor interrupted.

"Don't tell me again that you don't love the man!" she cried, in the anger that was swiftly betraying what she was. "Do you think I am blind? Do you think I'm a fool? Girls don't give lockets like that for mere friendship! They never turn hot and cold by turns at every mention of his name! He couldn't care for you and for such a woman as I am, you said! I have lied, you tell me to my face! Well, see how far I am lying when I tell you that you—you!—will be his ruin!—you, with your virtuous protestations! And either you will send him away—send him back to Clara Graystone, to keep his honest promise, or you'll make an absolute ruin of his chances! Now, which shall it be?"

Ruth was thoroughly aroused.

"And what about your love?" she cried, in a

passionate resentment. "What about his ruin if you persist in your selfishness? Do you care for him as a friend should? Do you mean to say that you are here talking like this for his good—that you are guarding his honor—his hopes of success? I don't believe it. I don't believe you are even Miss Graystone's friend. You don't know who I am or what I am—and you threaten that my friendship must bring about his ruin. If he is friends with you and finds no danger in it, I think he might safely continue an acquaintanceship older than I am, between his family and mine!"

Mrs. Meshe was furious, for she felt herself being defeated. She could have strangled Ruth where she stood. She had gained no ground, for, despite her wrath, Miss Sherwood had revealed positively nothing.

"Then you defy me?" she demanded, in a species of calm that was frightening to see. "You have as good as told me to do him all the harm I can by revealing this affair of his with you. Not content with that, you fling hidden insult in my face. You wish me—"

"I wish you to tell me what manner of friend you are to Mr. Hakon," Ruth interrupted. "We are two fellow-women; you said it yourself, but my friendship, it seems, is worse than yours. You come here commanding me to give up mine on pain of compassing his ruin. You have forgotten that you know nothing of my feeling towards Mr. Hakon. And for your part — are you fighting a battle for Miss Graystone or yourself when you speak so brazenly of some affair of his with me?"

That Ruth possessed an advantage, Mrs. Meshe admitted to herself. The girl's relationship with Hakon was a thing at which she could only guess.

"You love him. You dare not deny that you love him!" she cried from the depths of her angered intuitions. "What he has done to me awakens no pity in your bosom—no compassion in your woman's nature. Your love is absolutely selfish. You would rather see him ruined than honorable to me. You've got no heart to feel for a fellow-woman! Well—ruin him—ruin him! I have nothing more to say. I'll reveal this state of affairs, for I too am selfish in my helpless plight—selfish enough to want fewer women in his plans! Ruin him utterly with your stubbornness, and then perhaps he'll once more come to me for sympathy."

Despite the anger which had risen to goad her to hot retaliation, Ruth was frightened. She beheld Mrs. Meshe in her nakedness and paled at the sight. The very fact that Hakon had required that his marriage be kept secret, coupled with the confession of his tacit engagement to Miss Graystone, confirmed the belief that his position was perilous. That he might readily be ruined, especially by an irate woman, Ruth was convinced. She no longer entertained a doubt of Hakon's honesty towards all women, she did not believe that he had done this creature any wrong, but she did discern the danger ahead which she herself might increase by a reckless disregard of Mrs. Meshe's threat. She surprised herself in the way she rose to meet the occasion, for almost a terror was upon her.

"Forgive me if I said anything harsh," she said, more artfully. "I didn't mean to sound so disagreeable. I was hurt. All you have told me hurt—hurt my pride. You can understand that yourself. No woman likes to reveal all her feelings. . . . I haven't seen Mr. Hakon very recently. The last time he

came—I asked him not to call—till I invited him again."

Mrs. Meshe regarded the girl with the keenest of eyes. She saw no signs of deceit, for Ruth was telling the truth, strictly.

"Had you heard about his engagement then?" she asked, in a quieter voice. "Was that why you asked him not to call?"

"Yes," answered Ruth, still truthfully, "that was exactly my reason."

"Why didn't you say so before?" Mrs. Meshe inquired, half suspiciously.

"You are a stranger to me," said Ruth. "You must know how a woman hesitates to make admissions. You doubtless hesitated long before you decided to come to me and tell me — what you have."

It was only a half-satisfaction that Bertha was experiencing. The girl had matched her at every turn. Perhaps she was matching her now. Certainly the situation had altered. There was no possibility of inflaming the subject anew or of gaining a point. Ruth's very inscrutability was baffling. To demand anything further in the case was impossible. From her towering rage Mrs. Meshe had been humbled to calm, she hardly knew how. There was one trick only remaining. She took out her handkerchief and wept as if striving to control her sobs.

"I'm not sorry I came," she said, in a broken utterance. "I have—said mean things, and I've—lied a little, as any woman would—in such a plight, but—I meant it all for the best. I wanted—to warn you when I saw—from your locket—how young and innocent you were. And I'm glad—I'm very glad you know at last—what he is."

"Yes," said Ruth, "I think I know what he is. You were very kind to come."

And when Mrs. Meshe had presently departed, Ruth fairly ran to the note she had started to pen when interrupted. She wrote:

"Be sure to come to-night. I wish to see you very much indeed."

XXXV

WHEN Hakon arrived at the Hobart home that evening, Ruth was still alone in the house. Mrs. Hobart had 'phoned her at half-past five to know if she would not meet herself and husband at a restaurant, to have dinner with a friend just up from Newport, to arrange for the final bazaar of the season. In fear of being still away when Hakon should call, Ruth had declined the invitation as before, except that she added a word about the note she had sent and the visit she therefore expected.

She had two bright spots of color in her cheeks when she came into the room where Hakon was waiting. These appeared unnatural, as indeed they were, since her color was ordinarily an even glow of beauty and of health. The calm she had forced upon herself was likewise artificial. Many of the accusations and insinuations made by her afternoon visitor had left their sting, despite the ardor of her love.

After the somewhat formal greeting between them which they always strove to maintain, Ruth sat down where she could get the light on Hakon's face, while her own was still in shadow.

"I felt very lonely this afternoon," she confessed, almost at once. "I couldn't help writing you the note. I got to feeling sorry for lots of the things I must have said the other day. You still look worried."

He was worried. He had hardly known a moment of forgetfulness, to say nothing of pleasure, since the afternoon to which she alluded. He had regretted a thousand times that he had not cleared away from the Graystone alliance, in spite of her advice, in spite of the all he should thereby have surrendered. He had undergone despair and anguish with almost every thought of Ruth. His love for her had become far dearer than life, dearer even than his hope of immortality. His wish to stand untarnished in her sight was becoming a frenzy.

"Don't be sorry for anything you said," he begged. "You said some very beautiful, womanly things. If you took back any of them, they might be the ones I prize the most."

"Well—people always have to have a sort of finishing-up talk after such a time of stress," she answered, sagely, averting her gaze as she spoke. "It's never possible to say—everything—at such a moment. One thinks of new things afterwards."

"Yes," he agreed, "I have thought of many things you might well have demanded to know—and things I might have said myself. It wasn't a very pleasant afternoon, I'm afraid—not pleasant for you."

"Not for either of us," she admitted. "I only hoped—this afternoon—that we might be able to put it all out of our minds forever—to—kind of—finish it up." She colored as she drew thus close to what she wished to say, and her excitement increased tremendously.

He looked at her silently for a moment.

"Yes," he said, "if there is anything more to finish up—it ought to be done. Is there anything more you wished to ask?"

She saw that he was tortured, yet she could not

permit a false mercy to divert her present wise intention.

"There was no particular question about any particular point," she answered. "I only wanted to be quite sure that you had told me all there was to tell, so there would never be a sequel. Did you tell me all there was—all, I mean, that you wanted to tell?"

Hakon had frequently wished he had mentioned Mrs. Meshe, after all. He welcomed this present opportunity.

"No," he said, "I did not tell every fact there was. I only told the parts you needed to know—the parts that affected you. There was still another feature, so ugly, so shameless, that I hoped to forget it myself, and determined to spare you the knowledge that a creature entitled to call herself a woman could so debase her sex."

Ruth said: "Oh! . . . But of course it might be safer to tell me everything. Then, in the future, I could never be surprised if anything happened to come up and—and distort the facts."

"It would be better," he agreed. "You are far wiser than I. But how shall a man go to work to tell a pure, sweet woman—his own wife—the wife of his every thought, concern, and hope—how a trap was laid to rob him of his decency? How could I tell you such a thing as that?"

Ruth was breathing with difficulty. How to restrain her emotions she hardly knew. She wanted to know all there was to know, yet almost feared to hear the story. Mrs. Meshe had spoken such a mixture of truth and falsehood as might readily create a doubt in a stronger trust than Ruth's.

"I want to hear all about it," she said, as calmly

as possible. "You can pretend I'm a man, and tell me all about it as if I were."

"But I couldn't tell it to a man—as it ought to be told," said Hakon. "I'd blush to tell it aloud to a dog. And yet I can tell you something of it—enough and to spare—if only to prove that I wish to have no knowledge, no secrets, that you do not share. . . . It happened last Tuesday evening."

Ruth turned pale at once. She hardly dared trust herself to speak. A faint "Yes," was all the encouragement she could offer.

"I told you about a woman—I mentioned the fact that Graystone employs a woman to do some political work," he said, in his customary way of directness. "She is a clever, handsome woman who ought to have a marriage certificate with Graystone's name upon it—but hasn't. She used his name to summon me to a meeting—two meetings—at which I expected to see the man himself. The first was some time ago; the second was Tuesday night. Two others, when I knew her intentions, I ignored—the last one last Saturday evening. . . . Well, she didn't wish to see me on business; and we were alone in her house. . . . I hope that is explanation enough."

Ruth conjured all her courage and said: "I'd like to know very plainly—all about it."

"I don't want to say it! I don't see how I can say it!" he answered. "Won't you understand when I say that she has no moral sense whatsoever—and that she was very much enraged when I made her give me the key with which she had locked the door?"

Ruth arose abruptly and walked down the room to the deepest shadow. She remained there for a time that seemed to Hakon eternal. Then she came

back, her two eyes blazing. She halted ten feet from where he was standing, for he, too, had found a restful posture impossible.

"John," she said, "you *did* make her give you the key? You did leave her angry and—ashamed?"

"Good God! what else could I do?" he said, in a sudden emotion such as she had never seen him exhibit before. "I loathed the creature! I loathed myself for even being where she was! She may destroy me in her hate. Such a woman, scorned as she was scorned, would pale hell's furies if she had the opportunity. She threw down and crashed some costly ornament in her rage, even as I was going out the door. And what she may do, or attempt to do, against my political chances now, only she could tell. I have cursed the whole horrible political business, as a mess unfit for any man's contemplation—but out of it all, I remember that it brought us two together—and in my growing selfishness I'm happy, at least for a moment."

There was something that came to his face as he spoke, perhaps the faint, melancholy smile, that made Ruth think of the time when they two stood together in the temporarily deserted house and the rain was beating down. Had her woman's heart required yet more protestations of his innocence, that memory must have sufficed. Ruth required no more proofs than Mrs. Meshe herself had supplied in her shameless attempt to snatch him back, after all that had happened. The woman's purposes stood revealed to Ruth's keen, feminine intuitions. Her love rebounded all the more tremendously for the momentary doubts that had lurked in her mind.

"Oh, I'm glad—I'm glad—whatever she does!" she answered now, as she noted some feeble approach

to a brighter look on his worried face; and curbing the impulse to blurt out the fact that the woman had called in the afternoon, she tried to think of the wisest thing to do.

Her sympathy swayed her judgment in favor of silence. She felt an insupportable anguish at the thought of inflicting further worry on his heart. She restrained herself with all the might that recent crises had awakened in her being. It could serve no good purpose to tell him of the woman's attack already made on his name, or of insults heaped upon them both by such a moral degenerate. Yet she did feel a certain alarm as to what Mrs. Meshe might now attempt.

Hakon had made no reply for a moment. He looked at her half sadly, as if from afar.

"Forgive me for having told you all this," he said. "There will be nothing more to add, however. You now know it all."

"Have you thought what the woman may do?" inquired Ruth. "What will happen next?"

"I don't know," answered Hakon. "How could any one tell what such a being might be planning? I have never seen anything like her anywhere. Yesterday we met at Graystone's office, and she seemed to be exactly as she was before. She fears old Graystone, I am sure. Beyond that, no one could tell what lies in her mind."

"My dearest—my beloved!" said Ruth, in a tenderness no longer to be repressed. "My poor, dear man!"

The beautiful smile that illumined his face for a second was a rich reward to her heart.

"I have deserved it all," he said; "all but these moments of happiness with you."

"Can't we go riding on horseback again, one of these days?" she asked, to change the subject. "I'd love to do that!"

"I never know what minute to call my own," he answered. "The time before the convention is growing so short that Graystone is giving up everything now to complete the fight; and he warns me that my time belongs to him." He paused for a moment and then added: "Are you absolutely certain you wish me to continue with the game?"

"Absolutely!" she answered. "I wouldn't have you give it up now and let them say you didn't have the grit to go on—not for the world! You won't go off and give it up?"

"No," he said. "Not unless your mind should alter. I met you through this insane ambition, which therefore belongs half to you—since we were married. But—I'll be glad when it's over."

"Please don't worry, whatever occurs," she entreated. "I can't bear to see you look so haunted. Try to forget a lot of things. . . . Just remember that we *are* married, in spite of everything, and—and I love you more than ever. Now sit down and we'll talk of something else."

"I mustn't," he answered. "I'm half-way expecting a summons from Graystone—a telegram he thought he might be sending. He called me up on the 'phone this afternoon to give me warning. It's time for me to say good-night, I'm sure."

"Well—sit down, just for a second," she insisted. "I want you to—very much."

He took the seat obediently. She stepped to the side of his chair, and, bending down above him, gave him the lightest of kisses on the forehead.

"That's to take away your worries," she said to him, softly, "every one."

Then he presently walked down the outside steps and away towards the park, restored to a happiness ineffable.

XXXVI

DESPITE the fact that his mind was somewhat unburdened, and that Ruth had bidden him dismiss his worries, nevertheless John Hakon was in anything but a peaceful, quiet state of mind during the next few days.

In addition to the unrelenting pursuit of a dozen reporters, nearly always on his trail, a number of factors contrived to keep him in a state of mental perturbation. In the first place, he met Mrs. Meshe quite frequently at Graystone's office, at which times her studied urbanity and cordiality made her intentions entirely enigmatical, especially when coupled with the fact that she was helping to perform prodigies of labor to render his nomination certain. In addition to this, he had seen rather more than usual of Clara, whose developing spirit of coquetry was hourly prompting her to new audacities and deceits. Lastly, there was the fight — the game itself. With every passing day that brought the date for the great convention so near, there were telegrams arriving, rumors increasing, possibilities being multiplied, and, in consequence, fevers being engendered in the man's ambitious blood. He had felt that the game, in its sordid features, had so disgusted his better self that indifference as to its outcome was his only remaining emotion. He found he had been quite mistaken.

With every accession of delegates, secured by the

forces being operated hourly from Graystone's desk, the fever of excitement in Hakon's being rose. Even to know that much of the public talk was still for Brevoort, while this tremendous conspiracy to snatch the nomination at the final hour was being consummated—this was enough by itself to stir such a nature as his. Yet a greater element of mental unrest resulted from the fact that all his old-time hopes, ambitions, passions for political eminence, were surging within the man, as a mob, a horde of tumultuous brain-activities, all the more lawless for the long incarceration to which their retirement had amounted. His wish to be president had become wellnigh fanatical again, especially now, when the goal seemed but a pace or two away at the most. It was all a strain, as well as a fever, and all of it was telling on his nerves.

Saturday, Sunday, and Monday had been spent almost entirely with Graystone. Monday night was claimed by Clara. On Tuesday morning Ruth sent a note to inquire whether or not he could go with herself and the Hobarts to that final bazaar for which the arrangements had been completed the previous week. She enclosed an invitation to the function. He telegraphed back that he would try to be one of the party, but could not answer with certainty.

At twelve he was summoned again down-town to Graystone's presence. Senn and Mrs. Meshe were there with a budget of news, some of it excitingly good, some of it sufficiently dubious to make both Hakon and Graystone anxious. What with finishing the conference required by the various reports, and adding a few unimportant items to the draught of the speech with which a prominent senator would place Hakon's name before the convention, nearly three hours of the afternoon were consumed.

Hakon, upon returning to his office, discovered a note from Breeme, who had called, and, finding the door secured, had torn a sheet of paper from his notebook on which to leave a message of congratulations.

Hakon had hardly more than finished reading the note when the postman brought a letter from Clara. She scolded him playfully for having given her so little of his time on the occasion of his last visit, but protested she had enjoyed every moment quite as much as she would ever enjoy her sojourn in heaven, she was sure. On the second page of her epistle, however, he found something very like a threat.

"Mr. Kelpie is just dying to pay me attentions," she imparted. "He wished to propose! Think of that! I am having a dreadful time to keep him from doing so, and he *does* seem to want to kiss me so terribly, and if you don't watch out *he will see me* more than you do, and he may make me *like him*, just a little teenie bit, so you ought to *watch out*."

Her letter ended with "love and kisses," to which a brief postscript was added, reading:

"*Watch out! dearest John!*"

Hakon tore the letter into very small pieces and threw it into his basket. He felt in his pocket for Ruth's short note, and, reading it anew, was glowing with pleasure at the thought of attending that bazaar in the evening in her company.

His recollections were interrupted, however, by a call on his 'phone. It was Graystone on the wire. He announced that Senn had received further news, and wished another interview. Hakon would therefore meet Senn and himself at the house at eight o'clock.

Hakon assented. There was nothing else to do.

He therefore wrote at once to Ruth, informing her of what had occurred to make his attendance at the show in the evening impossible. He added that should the conference at Graystone's be concluded in time, he would still put in an appearance at the bazaar, if only to see her there for half an hour. This he sent by messenger. Then he left the office.

For the first time in fully a week he took out his car, for the hour or two of time that belonged to himself before he should be obliged to eat a dinner and report at Graystone's house. The run that he made was over ground traversed before. He was out for the change of his thoughts, not for the scenery rendered accessible by his machine.

He returned at half-past six, had his evening meal, dressed, and arrived at Graystone's on the hour, to find his chief and Mr. Senn very calmly and patiently filling the study with smoke.

Then for two solid hours Graystone either listened, planned, or demanded suggestions, both from Hakon and from Senn. Never before had his singular power for getting at what he termed "the bones" of various situations been more distinctly exemplified. Never before had he talked with such freedom of the sums of money being used or of the sources to which they were going. Never had Hakon realized, as he did to-night, the magnitude of the political drag-net which this man controlled nor the irresistible strength of its meshes. He saw a little into the system by which great ends may be achieved, and the people be deceived and cheated when an army of political generals, captains, lieutenants, and even sergeants combine for a single object, all under orders from the emperor himself, and all afraid to disobey, under penalty of political death, and all in

turn threatening a similar fate to the mean dependents, the men of the rank and file next below them in the scale.

The revelations, half made, were tremendously fascinating and wholly appalling. The game was at fever heat and steadily rising. Hakon's subconsciousness, the one remaining attribute of his better political self, was not yet silenced, but its protests were feeble and of no avail. He told himself a hundred times over that the course he meant to pursue, when once elected and inaugurated, more than justified the means by which he meant to achieve his ends.

When he left the Graystone house at last, the two men in the study had much still remaining that required their attention in privacy. But Hakon, intoxicating as he found it all, was glad to be out in the fresh evening air. He walked for fifteen minutes, to shake himself free of the atmosphere of smoke and sordid politics still clinging to his clothes and mind, then secured a passing hansom, and was driven at once to the almost palatial dwelling in Fifth Avenue, where one of society's favorites had given up ten of her beautiful rooms to the glories and trials of the charity bazaar.

In the glitter and splendor of the spectacle presented by the presence, in a setting so gorgeous, of Gotham's most regal and patrician women—dames, belles, and débutantes — Hakon was dazzled and bewildered. In all his American experiences he had never beheld such a spectacle — such display. It seemed to him there were hundreds of beautiful feminine creations, each more richly attired than the other, each more resplendent with jewels, each more bare and white as to shoulders, neck, and arms.

In the conflict of fragrances, even as in the conflict of tongues, his senses were benumbed to any one individual essence or to any one voice.

He knew there was music and singing, and humorous auctioneering by a dazzling young empress of dollars, but above it all rose a babel of voices most confusing. He could see a number of silken booths to which laughing women were piloting good-natured men. He was glad of the black punctuation-points which these men supplied to the crush. In a room on his right, when he had traversed two large apartments, was the most densely crowded pavilion he had seen. It was where the guests were eating. Men and women surged as a compact whole in that particular room, laughing, talking, endeavoring to get to the table, or fighting out through the pack, perhaps satisfied, perhaps bearing off the spoils of a raid in a plate or a glass.

Like nearly everything of the kind, it was not a gathering of the highly exclusive alone. There were parasites, political, financial, even social, in the throng. There were women entitled to no distinction —either of brains, birth, or respectability—foisted in by the sheer power of men who denied the creatures nothing.

It was brilliant, however, to the last degree—brilliant, noisy, intoxicating, even stimulating. But Hakon, beyond being interested from a merely curious point of view, was chiefly concerned with the problem of finding Ruth in such a swarm of beings.

He made his way slowly through the groups that moved so little to permit the passage of any one, and noted the absolute indifference with which his

presence was received. If any one saw him at all, it was merely by accident—the casual glance of a pair of eyes for a moment as he passed, but nothing that broke for a second the selfish occupation of the person behind the eyes in question.

Accustomed as he was to see hordes upon hordes of people in the streets whom he did not and could not know, he was nevertheless embarrassed here to find that not so much as one familiar countenance rewarded his quick, eager scrutiny of those he was passing or who were passing him.

At the farther end of the second room beyond a hazy suggestion of greenery gave welcome to his searching gaze at last, and towards it he made what progress he could, in an effort to be courteous to those who blocked his passage. He approached it slowly. When still half a room's-length away, and after he had discovered the greenery to be a palm-room of exceptional size and magnificence, he was abruptly gratified to see the good, round face and portly form of Walter Breeme, who was just emerging from the bower of beauty with the smiling Miss Weeve upon his arm.

A moment later some one came between the pair and himself, and when Hakon looked again Miss Weeve had disappeared and Breeme had turned his back. He still stood there, looking back towards the palms, when Hakon touched him on the shoulder. He turned quickly.

"Why, hullo, old man!" he said. "Say, what do you think of this for a crowd? I never felt so glad to see a man I knew in all my life! If this is the upper crust, I guess I'm the lard—I'm in it, but they don't see me! Say, you ought to have been with me a minute ago. I went in yonder, that forestry

addition, just to have a look around, and what do you think I saw?"

"You probably saw once more that Miss Weeve's hair isn't brown," hazarded Hakon. "I saw you two come out of there together."

"Did you?" answered Breeme, with a sickly grin. "Well, we have got things going, I'll admit, but we only went in for a moment, just to look at the plants. I knew of a bench inside there, of course. A man has to know something. I led the way towards the bench, and when we got up behind it, say! Did you ever see a weakling kiss a girl?"

Hakon said, "Never."

"Great shame you weren't along with us," added Breeme. "He didn't know how to do it. He thought it was ground-up glass he was eating. Why, the girl had to do fully ninety-nine per cent. of the work. But she was as brave as a New York cop with an oyster stew!"

"And didn't they see you, or hear you?" Hakon inquired.

"After the fatal deed was done," answered Breeme. "They then discovered something in the far end of the woods that they wanted to see. Hullo—they're coming now. That's the pair, just chassezing through the door—the girl who talks with her face."

Hakon gazed at the pair thus indicated with mingled emotions. It was Clara, with Mr. Kelpie.

He turned away, unwilling to be seen.

"Disgraceful," he said. "In a public place like this!"

"Oh, give her a chance," demanded Breeme. "A girl as old as that can't wait forever. Come with me to this smaller room over here on the left. If the principals haven't wearied, I'll show you a queen-

bee of Washington, with a whole swarm of senators and pin-heads from Albany, making all the other women madder than hornets."

Hakon suffered himself to be led away before he had time to think of raising objections. In the room to which they came a moment later, there were not more than four women, three of whom had at least two men apiece hovering about them. The fourth had twenty of the black-suited, white-fronted idolators of whom Breeme had spoken literally swarming in the sunlight of her glances.

Until they had walked almost entirely around the group, Hakon was prevented from seeing the woman's face by the press of her admirers. Then one glance was sufficient to excite him.

He beheld Mrs. Meshe, in spotless white and ermine, artfully holding these men she had known for long, in her capacity of lobbyist for Graystone, with the subtlest division of her favors. She had pestered Graystone for the invitation to the show with such persistency that in sheer self-protection he had exercised the "pull" that could open any barrier in town. She had come because she knew of a hundred women who would have given almost anything to prevent her presence here to-night. She had come because attendance at such a place as this, with its proud and mighty dames, was the one small feminine weakness of her nature.

It was only a moment that Hakon paused and stared at the woman in her bold and animal beauty, but brief as the second was, he realized that her physical perfections, lavishly displayed, must far outshine the simpler, quieter loveliness of nearly every other woman there—in the eyes of just such men as she held in her circle to-night.

He was turning to leave, his eyes still upon the spectacle, and the look of his scorn and disgust upon his lips, when Mrs. Meshe raised her eyes abruptly and beheld him.

One blazing glance was all she vouchsafed him. There was not a tremor of her eyes to denote that she knew him, yet he recognized the challenge she flung past the heads of the men who played page to her every mood or whim, and he was glad to continue onward through the room and into the great salon of the mansion.

"What about her?" inquired Breeme. "Wouldn't she do for the woman at the bottom of things, who pulls down an empire with a strand of her hair?"

"She seems to be popular with the 'swarm' that you mentioned," said Hakon, and, changing the subject, he added: "I don't suppose you've seen the Hobarts?"

"I saw Miss Sherwood, if that's what you mean," answered Breeme, with a knowing wink. "She was here in this very room a little while ago. There she is now, waiting for somebody to come, or for some one to go, I can't tell which," and he indicated a corner with a nod.

Hakon's glance met Ruth's a second later, where she sat in a chair, trying to be polite to one of those same young men whom Hakon had seen once before at the Hobart house.

"Say," added Breeme, "I've got to go and look for Miss Weeve."

They parted then and there and saw each other no more during the remainder of the evening.

With a hasty excuse to the wearisome young man by her seat, Ruth arose from her chair and came a few feet forward to welcome Hakon, in her frank, delightful way.

"I am very glad you've come," she said. "I was nearly on the point of going home."

In the simple modesty of her cream lace gown, she seemed to Hakon the most entrancing vision he had ever beheld. And in the freshness of her beauty, with her lustrous brown eyes so filled with tender lights, with her rich, dark mahogany hair affording such a splendid wealth of color and with her cheeks so warm with changing breaths of roses, above the ivory whiteness and smoothness of her chin and neck, she was, indeed, far more exquisite than Hakon could find the words to describe.

"Now that I've found you, I'm glad I came," he answered. "But to me you are the only excuse for the existence of any such diversion."

A light of happiness and mischief burned in her eyes.

"Which would you like better," she said, "the lights and the music and the people here, or the rain and lightning and—everything—up in that funny little house, that night when the car broke down?"

"I think I prefer nature's natural disturbances," he answered, with a smile. "I feel safer where I can only be struck by lightning."

His answer had been made half in humor, half in earnest. Delight was having her way with his heart, despite the fact that he had seen both Clara Graystone and Bertha Meshe less than ten minutes before. In the momentary forgetfulness that came as he stood there, looking fairly into Ruth's candid eyes, that were telling him anew of her sacred passion, he became absolutely indifferent to all the world about them.

"I liked it better—up there in the storm—myself, Ruth confessed. "I wonder when we'll ever have

another such a ride—and such a little luncheon in the woods."

"And such a break-down?" he added, smilingly.

"Yes—even that," she agreed. "Didn't you really enjoy it, after all?"

"More than anything that ever happened in my life," he answered.

For a second they said nothing further. She had never seen a look more intense in his deep-set eyes—never a look that declared so much of the love engulfing his nature. To her own eyes returned that marvellous look — that revelation — which the man had seen on the very first occasion of beholding her face.

It lasted but the briefest time, yet in that moment ecstatic oblivion to everything else of earth descended upon them. While the world was thus blotted out, Mrs. Meshe went by in her snowy white and ermine, and in one scorching glance comprehended the moment in its entirety.

She had followed in Hakon's wake with more than curiosity, but in nowise anticipating such results as this. Unseen by either of the twain, she continued on, gayly laughing and chatting with a senator, on whose arm she was gracefully leaning.

Hakon had been right in preferring fields and the open road, where only nature's thunderbolts could threaten a man with destruction. The all that Mrs. Meshe had wished to know respecting Ruth and Hakon, she had seen at a single glance.

XXXVII

DURING the next ensuing week Hakon was worried and harassed to the last degree. The strain attendant upon the near approach of the national convention was not the only call made upon his mental and physical strength. Excitement was consuming him daily, even hourly, so tense had every moment now become and so tremendous and successful were the moves being made from the centre of power.

Despite his utmost vigilance and his studied absence from his office, he was constantly the prey of reporters. He had changed his hotel; he had spent four days away from the city, in the effort to escape these attentions, which Graystone wished him to avoid.

Nevertheless, the papers were filled with alarm, or exultation, as the case might be, over the irresistible onsweep of his forces. The air of mystery still pervading his source of strength served only to heighten the interest and speculation incident to his amazing leap into favor. Even then the only persons who knew how absolutely the delegations from various States would fall in line were the Graystone adherents, who had purchased support in solid masses.

Three more meetings had been held at the Broadway headquarters, at which some of the mightiest political entities of the country had attended. Storm

and counter-storm had swept these conclaves, but after each the result had still been victory for the dominating genius of it all—Amos Graystone, emperor of destinies.

With incredible acumen, sagacity, and resourcefulness, bequeathed him from his former political bosshood, and augmented by his commercial pre-eminence, he knew every wire and string in the land on which a pull would bring an immediate response. And when he pulled, the tug was sudden and vicious, or steady and unrelenting, as occasion demanded. The whip he employed was a knout, with a gold piece on the end of every lash to cut in deeply. Like a team of snarling, half-savage dogs, ready to rend one another or him, his slaves obeyed his stinging voice. Those who had promised support to Brevoort were the ones that growled the most sullenly; and they were the ones to feel the sharpest blows.

It was all a battle of giants towards the end, with Graystone proving himself the mightiest of all. It was feverish, tense—a trial to all concerned. Save for a few small worries, begotten by the very uncertainty of all things human, Graystone was certain of his victory. He alone, of all the toilers, knew precisely how much money had been used, how much was still in reserve, how many delegates were absolutely secured, how many would waver so weakly that another stiff injection of money would be essential at the final hour.

He as well as Hakon was wrought up to the highest pitch. His final headquarters were in his brain; and beneath his skull, these swift-moving days, was centred activity almost phenomenal in its brilliancy. He was a maker of presidents and history, and he

knew that nothing short of a power as great as his own could block his game.

Hakon had seen Ruth but once in this week of trying hours, and then for a moment only, in the presence of Alice Hobart. That he was weakened and worried by the strain of all the portentous happenings, she knew. She yearned over him, longed to lend him her youthful strength, loved him with a tenderness and solicitude almost divine and thoroughly maternal. She accused herself for anything harsh which she might have said that day of his unspairing confession. In the mood that possessed her heart, she was ready and willing to make any possible sacrifice of herself, if such an action could result in benefit to him.

Concerning all the wonderful things that were drawing so swiftly to a head, Ruth was uncontrollably excited herself. That Hakon would be president—her president—she was thoroughly convinced. But aside from that, she loved him with a newer devotion, a newer manner of passion. To resist the temptation to give herself up to the clasp of his arms was trying the utmost control she had ever exerted over her natural, self-swaying impulses.

During all these days Bertha Meshe was abating nothing of her diligence in promoting the Hakon interests. She was almost fanatically exposing herself to danger in her service of Senn and others of Graystone's staff, where the actual passing of money was required. She was expending every art and artifice known to her system to promote the game and to render Hakon's success inevitable. Beneath her calm exterior raged an excitement to which even Hakon's was a second. The whole intensity of her nature—capable of fiery love, consuming hatred or

venomous rage—was concentrated on the work in hand and her own intentions at the end.

At the final conclusion of a meeting in Graystone's board-room, she it was who was summoned to the presence of the master-mind. Graystone equipped her with funds to the extent of almost a million dollars. The instructions which accompanied the transfer of funds provided a surprise even to her. Daring as she knew her chief to be, the coup he had planned and executed this afternoon fairly took her breath away. Nevertheless, she held her peace and agreed to act with more than her customary celerity, if possible. Inasmuch as hardly more than a week intervened between this hour and the national convention at Chicago, every moment was of the utmost importance.

"Now," she said, when the matter in hand was absolutely clear and understood, "what about securing headquarters up-town from which to operate? You wouldn't want all the telegrams coming here, nor a lot of them going out from here. We ought to have two or three rooms in another building, so that no one could trace the scent to its source."

"Yes. You can get whatever we need," Graystone agreed at once. "Make arrangements for a 'phone and a private Western Union wire, with an operator. I want it all complete for the last three or four days of work. You'd better get busy on that this afternoon."

Mrs. Meshe replied in a quiet way: "I will have it arranged and in order by Saturday night."

The fire that flashed for a second in her eyes was a sign that Graystone missed.

XXXVIII

ON Friday afternoon Hakon returned to the city from a trip to the country taken entirely with the purpose of effecting an escape from the sleuths of the press. He was not supposed to appear in Gotham till evening, when he might be obliged to call at the Graystone house. Indirectly, or almost directly, in fact, Ruth was responsible for his partial disobedience of orders. He felt that to see her was an absolute necessity, if worry were still to be endured.

He had received a little note from Ruth, for it was quite absurd to expect him to hide his whereabouts from her, and the half-confessed desire in her heart to see him soon had been conveyed to his understanding by some process finer than mere intuition.

A certain restraint which she had purposely put upon her words in the note only served to excite even greater desire to see her without further delay. Shortly after three o'clock he was driven to the Hobart residence.

Ruth was at the window. She had hoped he might respond to her note, willing as she was to make her own emotions subservient to his needs and plans in this exciting hour. Wildly as her heart was beating thus to see him here, nevertheless, when he entered the room where she was waiting, she had skilfully concealed every sign of her worried eager-

ness. She came towards him quietly and placed her two hands on his shoulders for a moment. That much was not to be denied her yearning and hungering nature.

"You are pale; you are tired and worried," she said to him, tenderly. "It's all a great strain—I can see what it means to your nerves. Sha'n't we go driving in the park? I can have the carriage here in twenty minutes. Alice wanted me to take it. Wouldn't the air and sunshine do you good?"

Her thoughtfulness touched Hakon profoundly. He had never loved her so much as he did to-day; and he knew he should love her even more on the morrow, since the divinity of his passion was almost hourly increasing.

She knew this, she felt it, as her eyes met his and understanding was matured and beautified between them. Her answering passion transcended anything she had ever before experienced, reaching heights supernal as it did, in the light of the faint, beautiful smile that came upon his countenance.

That a ride such as Ruth was proposing might not be wise at such a juncture as this in his affairs political, Hakon was well aware. He could not, however, discern any positive danger that might result from taking such a pleasure even should the almost dreaded reporters discover him in the park. Moreover, nothing could have been more acceptable to his worn-out body, his mind, or his heart.

"I'm a little too tired to resist temptation," he said, with a light of love sublimating the look in his eyes. "I can think of nothing on earth I would enjoy so thoroughly."

Ruth made a little sound of gladness, even as she

sped away to ring for a servant to order the horses and carriage.

"You don't think I am frivolous? You don't think I fail to appreciate all that you are enduring these days?" she said to him, somewhat eagerly, on returning. "You know, dear, that I would do almost anything to help?"

He raised his hand with a gesture that was far more eloquent than words. He could think of nothing verbal to answer till a moment had passed, then he told her:

"You are the only one in all the world I can count on who will help later on."

Her eyes abruptly filled with tears. She would have given anything—anything she possessed in all the world—to put her arms for a moment about his neck, and to have kissed him just once, but she held herself in check, even as Hakon was denying himself the impulse to fold her to his heart.

"I must go and get my hat," she said, after another of those wonderful moments of silence; and catching his hand in both her own she held it for a second against her cheek, then released it and hastened away.

The carriage arrived at the door by the time she reappeared. She had changed her frock for a delicate green creation, wonderfully quieting and becoming. Her hat was constructed of the same soft material, and against the rich dark mahogany of her hair was as beautiful as the summery afternoon itself.

The drive through the park was one of quiet enjoyment, marred by no incident worthy of record. There were countless equipages far more resplendent than theirs on the smooth brown turnpikes of the city's Elysian Fields, and the sunlight was tossed in largess from glistening horses and polished spokes, as

fashion and elegance trooped beneath the trees; but to Hakon and Ruth there was nothing of earth that afforded a tithe of the charm vouchsafed by the mere fact of riding thus together, in harmony with nature's most entrancing mood.

Till after five o'clock they continued this quiet excursion into realms of infinite peace and charm, their conversation frequently interrupted by long, delightful silences that meant far more than the commonplace topics to which they recurred from time to time.

When it came to an end, a new youth and buoyancy had taken the place of exhaustion in Hakon's entire being, exactly as Ruth had predicted to herself when she first suggested the outing. For herself, she was nearly as happy as a mortal is given to be, not only because they two were together, but a little also because of the change she had seen to come across the gray face whereon, to her, had been written signs of more than ordinary weariness or common worry.

Hakon remained but a moment when at length they returned to the house. He then secured a cab in which to be driven to his newly selected hotel. Upon arriving there he found a note from Graystone, unsigned, except for the man's initials. In it Graystone admonished him to be sure to take a good long rest. He had written:

"You needn't show up at the house to-night. Clara will keep. May have to see you to-morrow. We'll have a special office for receipt of news and for meetings. Will have it further up-town. Have sent a box of cigars. Smoke up and rest."

The cigars were already in Hakon's room, as he presently discovered. But he knew it was hardly Graystone's heart that he had touched.

XXXIX

IN her brisk and diligent manner Mrs. Meshe had completed the equipment of a new set of offices by Saturday afternoon. She had chosen a suite of four large rooms in a quiet Fifth Avenue building, in order that Graystone might occupy one apartment to himself, while Hakon and any other possible visitors could employ the two that remained, after installing the special Western Union telegraph service in the fourth.

Despite the fact that much of her time had been thus expended, the tireless woman had toiled in twenty other directions with unceasing energy. In not a few capacities her mental acumen, as well as her intuitions, far exceeded those of Graystone. Her mind was quick with expedients. She threw all her faculties into the struggle which was culminating rapidly in far-off Chicago, assisting Senn and Graystone to stem dissensions here, to reinspire courage there, as half-hearted delegates, affected by the sheer Brevoort personality, threatened utter collapse and surrender to the side from which they had deserted. That men who are weak enough to sell themselves are likewise weak enough to forget their promises and cheer with an apparently winning side, all were quite aware. The task before them at present was to prevent defections from the ranks of purchased delegates secretly pledged to Hakon, and

this could be accomplished only by threats and the liberal use of more money.

Already, that Saturday morning, the press was filled with reports from the gathering throngs at Chicago. Already the first faint rumor of an anti-Brevoort demonstration had appeared. The Associated Press despatches gave a column to the announcement that, with the convention only four days off, there was much bitter talk against Brevoort for his assumed dictation and for his utter absorption in himself of all the power of organization. He was interfering with the prerogatives and functions of all the regular political leaders. Many national senators were chafing and fretting openly in a spirit of sullen resentment that boded—none knew what. In conclusion, this despatch announced that, while this feeling was obvious in all directions, yet, nevertheless, the slighted and humiliated leaders would none of them refuse to do the bidding of Brevoort.

To allay any possible suspicions which might arise with half revelations being made thus early, the Graystone forces now put a very decided quietus on the overconfident boom of the prominent New-Yorker who aspired to be a nominee for vice-president. That he had gotten in line as a possible candidate for the office to run with Brevoort was a blind. He would run with Hakon or not at all. Hence the apparent withdrawal of his name thus early in the proceedings. There would always be time enough to re-animate his boom when the more important business was concluded.

On Sunday Graystone moved to the newly installed headquarters, and Hakon was kept there all day in idleness waiting in the largest of the rooms, while his chief and Mrs. Meshe, with a stranger to whom

he was not presented, kept the special wire humming with instructions, questions, and suggestions. Three times Mrs. Meshe appeared to make some inquiry concerning Hakon's past political career—some detail of apparent insignificance heretofore overlooked and now of much possible importance.

A certain hardness had overspread the woman's demeanor as well as her countenance. She treated Hakon with no more feeling than if he had been a marble statue. Nevertheless, the pallor which had come to his face in the stress of the hour gave the keenest satisfaction to her nature.

That night he left the joint offices at eight, and called on Ruth for twenty minutes. On arriving at the Hobart residence he found a small company of friends already there, and Ruth's attentions, therefore, much divided. Indeed, they two had hardly more than half a dozen sentences to themselves, and these in the presence of all the company. Even this much, however, afforded him a pleasure and instilled a little calm into his over-toiling blood. As for Ruth, she saw that he was wrought to the highest tension. She knew even better than he knew himself that the strain he was undergoing might readily make him very ill, for these hours of mental perturbation were racking his nerves and sapping his vitalizing strength. When he went, she laughed and talked with exceptional animation, in the worry come so heavily upon her heart.

On Monday morning the papers reported a state of dulness at convention headquarters such as no campaign in American politics had ever before witnessed. The Hakon boom was reported a thing of the past. Hopes in the new Graystone offices ran accordingly high. The secret of the great manœuvres was still in-

tact. There was no apparent leakage of facts, no suspicion in the ranks of delegates still remaining loyal to Brevoort. Comments were made on the lack of enthusiasm. There were no banners, no bands, no pictures even of Brevoort, said the Associated Press. There was no more than a hint, however, that this lack of feeling could possibly foreshadow Brevoort's defeat when the hour for making the nominations should arrive. It was all ascribed to the cut-and-dried nature of the great Chicago meeting. In the mean time Graystone and his forces were feverishly computing, for the hundredth time, how much of it all had been cut and dried by themselves, and how much would remain in their hands—delivered goods —at the only moment which could really count.

In the afternoon bad news arrived. The general consensus of opinion, that everything about the convention belonged to Brevoort, was affecting some of the weaklings. They complained that the country seemed to expect nothing less than Brevoort's nomination, and they themselves would "look like thirty cents" unless they fell in line and helped to make it unanimous.

Graystone made a hurried call for more money—and got it. Much of it came from his own private funds. He was buying a place in the White House for his daughter—as well as a tool for the interests which he represented. The cost was the last thing that mattered. He telegraphed a million dollars to the trusted agents at the centre of trouble, with instructions to use it all and use it fast. He added that more, even twice the amount if necessary, would be sent at once to be properly disbursed to Hakon's "friends" just the moment the nomination was secured.

The man had never shed so much nervous perspiration in his life as he was shedding every hour. His tension of feeling was even in excess of Hakon's; and Hakon was kept on the outside edge of everything, including information as to how the fight was going, and the outside edge is a place where men are made to suffer.

During all these hours Mrs. Meshe appeared to be the one calm person in the place. As a matter of fact, however, she was strung to the point of snapping in every thew of her being. Her hour was coming—was almost here—and how she could wait and make it all the more complete was almost more than she knew. She at least had ample opportunity for flying hastily about and doing things that might readily account for that strange intensity of fire in her eyes. Moreover, she avoided Hakon as much as possible. The passion which had burned in her veins when she still had hoped to win him had left a sore spot, still feminine, remaining in her heart. His pale, anxious face these hours was at last a thing she preferred to escape.

For his part, Hakon had almost forgotten the woman's former attitude in this total absorption of his faculties. When he started at times with a sudden, poignant recollection of the rage in which he had seen her at their last private meeting, he wondered vaguely at the strange enigma which her work and personality presented; but he presently lost the thread of thought in the greater anxiety begotten by the game.

That night, while Mrs. Meshe sped up-town with a dress-suit case full of money to be paid for needed help, Graystone remained at headquarters, supperless, coatless, engrossed with receiving and sending

despatches, and with figuring and worrying, and figuring anew. Hakon had partaken of a half-eaten dinner and returned to watch and wait. He was wholly ignored for hours at a time, but Graystone wished to have him near, and he himself preferred to be on hand.

The convention met on the following day, which was Tuesday, and adjourned without attempting to transact any business of importance. Every one knew the organization was pledged to delay the work of the meeting in the interests of Chicago's great hotels. Meantime, Hakon, Graystone, and Bertha Meshe felt the fever increase in the land.

An all-day session that was carried far into the night at the Graystone headquarters developed the fact that again worry perched above the door. The strain was growing unbearable. Hakon was living on sheer force of nerves. It was something akin to an instinct for self-preservation that made him go to the Hobart residence and seek out Ruth for the five-minute talk which he felt he absolutely required.

What he told her differed but little from what he had heretofore imparted. It was all a waiting game as yet, and nothing could be known. In the occult way that not infrequently arises between two persons so mentally united as he and Ruth already were, his recital transferred nearly all of his worry to her, and his own mind cleared and assumed a certain strength and cheer which in the afternoon would not have seemed to be possible.

He did not know that Ruth had taken on his load of cares, when he came to leave, for her smile was brave and her eyes were burning lustrously with hope; yet she was wholly possessed by anxiety the moment he had gone. His pallid face, hardly once

genuinely ruddy since the day he had made his confession, haunted her memory incessantly. She tried to send him mental strength; she tried to send him the sleep that ordinarily came so sweetly to her own eyes and senses, when at length she retired; and thus she laid awake all night, while he, singularly enough, did enjoy such a rest as he had not had for days.

During all of Wednesday the stubborn apathy at Chicago continued. There was no change in the situation, save that the Graystone forces had worked a healthy return to strength throughout the rank and file of the Hakon delegates and were confident of winning.

Graystone's hopes were in the ascendant. He had raised another vast sum of money from his personal assets, and wired the word that as funds were practically unlimited nothing was to be left to chance or the accident of sentimental feeling which any one might still retain for Brevoort.

Hakon, in the second strength which rest had girded upon him, remained all day and all evening at the improvised offices. The hush and lull that all instinctively felt preceded the storm which perhaps the morrow would engender, when the Hakon forces arose in one huge, sinister mass to sweep Brevoort from his feet and nominate their secret candidate—this ominous quiet pervaded all the premises, during the final hours of the day. All were aware that the nomination at Chicago was due, and that while nothing particularly prompt was promised, yet it might take place within an hour, if need be, of the convention's next assemblage.

Like a tigress, calm in her confident waiting to spring on a helpless victim, and aware that no blame

could attach to herself when the other jungle creatures should come upon the body of her slain victim, Bertha Meshe had waited for her hour of revenge.

It arrived on Thursday morning, when she thoroughly expected that the throng at Chicago would conclude their business in the afternoon. She chose the moment when Hakon's hopes had brought a flush of color to his cheeks, an animation to his speech, a brightness to his eyes. Then she did a simple thing.

She wrote a telegram addressed to Ruth.

"If possible, come and see me without delay," was all it said.

At the bottom she gave the address of the temporary offices where all was going on—and the name she signed was Hakon's.

XL

THE excitement and worry which attacked Ruth Sherwood on receiving the message sent in Hakon's name were wellnigh insupportable.

She dared not hope and she wished not to fear—but fear it was that possessed her most—fear and worry and anguish of heart, as she mentally urged on the horse in the cab that hastened her progress to the building where Hakon was waiting.

His pale face and worried eyes were all she could see in her unnamed dread. A thousand regrets that she had not treated him more kindly, that she had not kissed him—told him more of her all-sustaining love—made pain throughout her being.

She was trembling as she stepped at last to the ground from the hansom. She was trembling all the way up in the elevator, and all the way as she sped in her weakness along the hall to the apartment with the number indicated by the telegram.

At the door of Hakon's room she halted, and leaned for a moment against the lintel, her hand upon her heart, her breath almost refusing to come. She was weak and faint. She tried to listen, but no sound came through the barrier that separated him from her; and the tiny knock that she sounded on the panels could not have been heard by the overwrought man within.

She tried to knock again, but power had run from

her muscles and left them drained. In a sudden fear that Hakon, inside, might not be able to speak, or to move, she suddenly grasped the knob, and opening the door, went in.

Hakon was pacing up and down the room. He had just received word from Graystone that victory was certain—that nothing could defeat them now. He would get the nomination on the first ballot to a certainty.

He heard a little cry, half moan, half a note of gladness, that came before the sound of the closing of the door. Even as he turned, Ruth ran weakly towards him, her pale face a picture of happiness, struggling with the agony of a moment before.

He had to catch her in his arms. Otherwise she must have fallen. Moreover, a sudden realization of the fact that she was intensely distraught was vouchsafed his senses. A pang of suffering, to equal hers, shot instantly through his heart.

"Dearest—dearest—dearest!" was all she could say, and she placed her arms in a nerveless embrace about his neck, and lay upon his breast, all but ready to collapse, thus to find him well and quite himself, after all her fears.

"Beloved," he said, "beloved—why, what—why, how did you come—"

Then the door that led to the farther room was abruptly opened, and there stood Graystone, urged in upon the scene by Mrs. Meshe.

For a moment he stood staring at the picture before him with unbelieving eyes, even as Hakon stared back in speechlessness.

Ruth had failed to hear the older man's approach. Her back was towards that particular door; she was still almost too weak to stand alone.

"What in hell is this?" demanded Graystone, sharply.

Ruth instantly untwined her arms from Hakon's neck and faced about, a color surging hotly to her cheeks.

Hakon made no answer.

Graystone closed the door behind him, without for a second averting his gaze from Hakon's face.

"Damn it, Hakon," he growled, in the irritable temper which nervous anxiety had increased in his nature, "don't you know that this is no time or place for your women friends? Don't you know any better than to bring your damned —— here?"

Hakon's face turned scarlet instantly, then whiter than marble and harder than steel. The insult to Ruth could almost have killed him, so awful was the rage and shame within him. He had not had the time to ascertain how she came to be here; he could not know how it happened that Graystone had come in upon them in a moment so fatal. He did know, however, that the moment had come when he could bear no more—no more of the shame, dishonor, or secrecy in which the whole game had been engendered. He knew that the last unendurable straw had been added to his burden and that something had to break.

He went towards Graystone as one who fears some awful deed of violence which his hands may suddenly commit. He hauled at his collar for air.

"Graystone," he said, "take that back. Take it back before I—"

"John!" interrupted Ruth, abruptly, the instant she realized who Graystone was and all that it meant for Hakon to break with him now. "John—don't fight—don't do it—don't do anything now! I beg

of you—let him say it—let him say anything! Don't mind me—not now—you mustn't mind me! I'll go —I'll go. You mustn't fight!"

Even as Hakon brushed her gently aside from his path and moved again towards Graystone, he thought of the girlish sacrifice which her mother had made for himself in that dim and far-away past. He even gave her a smile for a second—such a smile as she had never seen before upon his face.

The hour had come—the hour of renunciation when Hakon knew he must abandon everything for which he had striven and suffered—everything towards which his life-long ambition had impelled him—everything at last within his grasp. In that second he knew he could still dissemble and possess it all, the nomination—the very presidency itself. He knew that Ruth meant all she said, that she was willing to be sacrificed for his advancement. He knew he could accept her proffered suggestion and satisfy the man before him. But greatly as he loved success, achievement, and the honors of the presidency, he yet loved Ruth and her bright honor more.

"This is the end," he said, more to her and himself than to Graystone. "This is more than I will bear from this human hound." And he stepped in front of Graystone in a terrible calm that the older man recognized and feared instinctively.

"By God, Graystone, you are going to apologize on your knees for this," he said, in the low, even voice of might which Graystone had heard before. "You are going to beg the pardon of my wife. My wife!—Do you hear me?—My wife!—if there is one decent apology left in your shameless being. My wife! You—"

"Wife!" almost screamed the older man, suddenly

purple and awful with rage and baffled emotion. "Your wife—you—"

"Shut up!" commanded Hakon, in a voice of sinister command. "You have said your last say! You have done your last wrong to me and mine! You have come to the place—"

"I won't stand it!" roared Graystone, in his towering wrath. "Married! You married! You tell me a thing like—"

"I'll tell you more!" cried Hakon, superb in the sudden return of all his old-time manhood. "I'll tell you that all your shameless traffic has brought you one defeat at last! I'll tell you that I know how utterly infamous you can be! I'll tell you that I know at last how you tried to ruin my father's honor in the memory of his son!"

He snatched from his pocket the letter written by his father to Ruth's grandfather, and struck it open with one hot gesture.

"I'll tell you that I've found you out in baseness too sickening for words!" he cried again, as Graystone felt his anger wholly outmatched. "I'll tell you that here—here!—is a copy of the true letter that my father wrote concerning that Blue Gap bridge—the letter that you and your hirelings altered to bring me shame and utter unhappiness!" He struck the letter repeatedly with his hand till at length the paper was abruptly torn.

Graystone, meantime, contending against this onslaught with all the power in his mighty being, glared back in fury once again.

"You good-for-nothing whelp," he screamed, "I'll—"

"Hold your tongue!" commanded Hakon as before. "You'll do nothing further to me, or my wife, ex-

cept to get on your knees and say you're ashamed of what you've said. You have stripped me—stripped me—of honor, of self-esteem, of nearly every precious attribute of manhood I ever possessed. You have poisoned me, drugged me—made me shameless, low—a creature like yourself. You have played every trick you could think of to debase me, rob me of everything that pride holds dear or that memory recalls. You have made me false to all my kind, to myself—to the teachings received at my mother's knee! You have stripped me naked of everything but the ultimate passion for decency! And that, by God! is mine—absolutely mine—forevermore! I fling it back—the worthless prize. My hands can't hold to you and decency together! The pittance of honor still left in my grasp is my passport out of hell—and out I go! Now—down on your knees!—get down on the floor, and tell Mrs. Hakon you apologize for every word you've said!"

What strength had not been sapped from Graystone's being by the strain of the past few days departed abruptly in the flame of Hakon's wrath. The revelations made in Hakon's confession and accusation had suddenly slain his one consuming ambition and left it lifeless at his feet. The rage that had risen within him when he realized all that Hakon was saying—and all the ruin it meant to his own cherished schemes—had paled into insignificance in the dominant mastery of Hakon's will, at last unloosed.

In the habit of fury and querulous temper so long an attribute of himself and his successes, the man could not, however, even yet consent to forego some terrible outburst. His face had been livid with rage that found no chance for vent in the hot, quick out-

pouring of Hakon's superior anger; and now the disaster, in all its appalling dimensions, revealed itself to his helpless mind, rendering craven the final fever of his wrath.

"You—you can't be married. You can't be married, John," he cried. "You're engaged to my—"

"No more!" interrupted Hakon. "I said you'd apologize to my wife. Shall I take you by the throat? . . . Get on your knees and say you're sorry for all you said!"

For a moment Graystone attempted still to oppose his will to that of the man who at last was far the stronger of the two. His cold, gray eyes were held by Hakon's gaze. The power of Hakon's will made weak his senses. He emitted another such sound as Bertha Meshe had made when she gave up the key that night in her house; then down on his knees he went, and supported his sinking weight with his hands upon the floor.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean any harm. . . . I had to have my joke."

Behind the door Mrs. Meshe had heard it all. She turned away with a feeling of emptiness in her hands, in which she had thought to feel the roundness of triumph in revenge.

Hakon caught up his hat with an almost savage eagerness. Then he took Ruth's hand, and drawing it gently through his arm, walked with her out of the room.

When at length Amos Graystone had sufficiently recovered to return to his own particular apartment, he faced Mrs. Meshe in a mood of reactionary ugliness.

"John and I have had a row," he said. "You've

got to help me call off everything—everything! I don't want his damned fool name even mentioned in the city of Chicago!"

All afternoon he sped the telegrams that dragged down in ruins the mighty and costly edifice of politics he had labored so long to erect. The game was done.

XLI

IT was evening—Friday evening—in the fragrant open of the Jersey hills to which, that fateful Saturday, Ruth and Hakon had gone in his balking machine. There were two silent figures pacing quietly up and down in the road in front of that same little homely house to which the storm of that former time had driven the twain.

For the twentieth time the explanation of how she came to appear at his office, at a moment so vital, had been made by the still worried Ruth.

An hour before the news had come, even so far away from the towns as this, that Brevoort had received the nomination, no other name having been presented before the convention.

Ruth mistook the quiet which had settled on the man at her side.

"It was all my fault," she said, contritely. "If it hadn't been for my weakness when I found you there in that room—"

He placed his hand gently over her mouth.

"God bless you, sweetheart, it was a kindness that was done," he said. "Otherwise, how could I feel such peace and happiness in here?" and he struck himself above the heart. Then, after a long minute of silence, he added: "By the token of their desperation to beat him, I'm convinced that Brevoort must be a mighty good man for the people."

Having come to the turn of the dimly lighted road, they halted, and stood for a moment silently listening to the song of some bird dreaming in the trees above their heads.

"It was nice of you to take me to be married again, at the church," said Ruth, and slipping her arm from his she put it, with its mate, about his neck and drew down his face till he kissed her on the lips.

Then slowly up from the margin of the eastern hills climbed a great golden disk of splendor.

Their honeymoon had risen.

THE END